



# WORKING HOURS:

EXPLORING GENDER DIMENSIONS OF  
UNPAID CARE WORK IN SRI LANKA

EDITED BY SEPALI KOTTEGODA AND PRADEEP PEIRIS



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The Women and Media Collective (WMC) is a non-Governmental organization formed in 1984 by a group of Sri Lankan feminists interested in exploring ideological and practical issues of concern to women in Sri Lanka. Since its inception WMC has been actively engaged in bringing about change based on feminist principles in creating a just society that does not discriminate based on gender, ethnicity or religion.

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Cover Image - *“Our kitchen is a happy place”*

This painting was submitted by Theekshana Vidusha (8 years old) from Ratnapura District for the Children’s Art Competition held in 2021 on the theme of **“How I think about Unpaid Care Work”** organized by WMC. Theekshana won the first place in the 8-10 category.



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# Introduction

Care is a crucial dimension of well-being. People need care throughout their lives in order to survive. Care has long been considered to be the ‘natural’ responsibility of women, as a result of which the costs of providing care fall disproportionately on women. These costs include forgone opportunities in education, employment and earnings, political participation, and leisure time. - Esquivel, V (2013).

## 1. Background

This publication brings together a selection of research papers presented at the Conference on ‘Equality & Equity in Recognising Unpaid Care Work and Women’s Labour in South Asia’ convened by the Women and Media Collective (WMC) in collaboration with the Social Scientists’ Association (SSA) in October 2022 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The conference was conceptualised as a platform to broaden the discourse on unpaid care work in Sri Lanka. Unpaid care work is still in a relatively nascent area of research and analysis in the country and the conference aimed at drawing in contributions that would venture toward a better understanding of the phenomenon and, its importance in household social relations, as well as its economic contributions within households and to the larger national economy. The research call was for papers that examined work done in the home, primarily by women, for the well-being of the family-based household, including domestic work, care of household members and, also, related voluntary activities such as maintaining social networks which support households in many ways. This research project was the first time in Sri Lanka that the overarching theme of unpaid care work brought together researchers and activists to share learnings that would enrich the larger discourse on women’s empowerment and gender equality.

More than a century ago, Engels argued that a central factor in women’s liberation was women moving out of the oppression of the “monogamous nuclear family” and becoming wage earners in the labour force.<sup>1</sup> Access to one’s own income is indeed a likely turning point in building women’s autonomy. The ability to earn an income

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<sup>1</sup> See Sharon Smith, “Engels and the Origin of Women’s Oppression”, *International Socialist Review*, Issue 2, Fall 1997. [https://isreview.org/issues/02/engles\\_family/](https://isreview.org/issues/02/engles_family/)

brings with it the formal inclusion recognition of women's labour as well as opening up avenues for women's participation in decision-making at household and community levels.

However, contemporary research on, and analysis of, women's economic and social positioning shows that being "counted" in the labour force and having one's own income do not denote a linear path towards gender equality. The gender division of unpaid care work is based on patriarchal social norms, and unequal relations of power within households, reflected in the absence of recognition of these workers in national accounts and definitions of the labour force.

The concept of unpaid care work and the discourse about its recognition has gained ground over the last several decades - in research and analysis of feminist economics, in socio-cultural studies and, in Development discourses. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have gone the furthest to include Unpaid Care Work in Goal 5, the stand-alone goal on Gender. It calls for recognition and valuing of unpaid care work, the provision of adequate public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.<sup>2</sup> The global Development discourse at the UN level, for the first time, explicitly calls on governments to set targets to recognize unpaid care work and acknowledges the need for shared responsibility within the household and family, albeit qualified with the statement, 'as nationally appropriate'.

Yet, the complexities of inequalities of power in the 'reproductive' household arena and in the 'productive' economic arena need to be fully grasped, if we are to attain Goal 5.

A factor that cuts across women's lives is the time and labour that they "allocate" aside from remunerative work, for household activities for their respective families and the "balancing" of their daily engagement with economic, social or political activities. On a daily basis, women take care of children, cook, are responsible for the wellbeing of elders if any in the household, ensures that children are dropped off at and/or, picked up, from school, that children have a meal ready for when they return home from school, that clothes are washed, water or firewood is fetched, work in rice fields and/or home gardens, attend community

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 5.4. <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/5-gender-equality/>



level meetings. These activities are perceived as their responsibilities - because they are women. Many women also look for opportunities to earn a regular income: as employees of tea plantations, domestic workers, factory workers, and cleaners in office buildings. Or, through less regulated or “informal” means such as “home gardeners” who sell produce from their home gardens at weekly fairs, or home-based cooks who prepare and sell food.

Enabling women, men and policy makers to understand unpaid care work in terms of the time that is put in and the value of that work is a key factor in political organising to bring the issue into the public arena.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

Women work every day. But only when women can show that they directly and regularly earn a monetary income is their labour counted in the national labour force.

If not, for the most part they are seen as or see themselves as “just housewives” who “do “nothing” at home.

Feminist economists, researchers and anthropologists from the 1980s are among key contributors to problematising unpaid care work and driving the debates on the recognition of unpaid care work in social, economic and political arenas.<sup>3</sup> These debates have brought out dimensions of women’s economic empowerment, gender identities and, public policy and macro-economic planning.<sup>4</sup> It has pushed for the recognition of the political economy of unpaid care work and, the imperatives of valuing the labour of women within households.<sup>5</sup> The impact of global crises such as the Covid 19 pandemic on women’s access to paid work, and more importantly on their unpaid care work in their homes only serve to highlight the urgency of integrating the multi-dimensional aspects of women’s labour into social and policy interventions.

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Young, Carole Wolkowitz, & Roslyn McCullagh (1984). *Of Marriage and the Market: Women’s Subordination Internationally and its Lessons*. Routledge & Kegan Paul; Marilyn Waring (1999). *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*. University of Toronto Press; M. Waring (2014). *Who’s Counting? The Value of Unpaid Work in the Global Economy*. <https://prezi.com/u9etqy3ozg6z/whos-counting/>

<sup>4</sup> Gaelle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacks. *Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes*. OECD Development Centre. December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> D. Elson (2017). *Recognise, Reduce and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work: How to close the Gender Gap*. *New Labour Forum*, Vol 26(2) 52-61; Deepta Chopra, *A Feminist Political Economy Analysis of Public Policies Related to Care: A Thematic Review*, IDS, University of Sussex. 2013

Women and girls, men and boys, are socialised to expect that women provide unpaid care work in the home. Whether women are engaged in fulltime housework or in regular paid work they are expected to fulfil their care activities, such as cooking, cleaning and washing, and looking after dependents. These extended hours of labour/work are not recognised in national annual data on the labour force. As Folbre (2006) points out, “we need better measures of the inputs into care rather than merely capturing some of the outputs of care in terms of improved health and education in the Human Development Index”.<sup>6</sup> These inputs include designing public and social policies that recognise women’s contributions through unpaid care work, reduce the workload associated with this work and redistribute responsibility for care, for example through state programmes, and community involvement.

Any discussion on unpaid care work necessarily brings in the conceptualising of “work” and of “family”. These two concepts are fundamental to social and economic relationships in society. “Work” should be self-explanatory; it denotes the exertion of physical effort/labour, for periods of time, towards a tangible output. Family is construed to be a “universal” phenomenon which encompasses kinship and care for its members. Including unpaid care work in these social constructs brings into focus asymmetrical relations of power in what is considered to be work of value to the economy and how access to resources within the family is distributed. Within the unit of “the family”, care work responsibilities are highly gendered. Within the wider economy, “work” is recognised when it is perceived to add direct monetary value to products or services.

Hence, to better understand the multi-dimensional attributes of unpaid care work, Esquivel (2013) illustrates, “unpaid care work is unpaid care because it arises out of social or contractual obligations, such as marriage or less formal social relationships. It is care because it is a group of activities that services people in their wellbeing. And it is work because it is an activity that has costs in terms of time and energy”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy Folbre. *Measuring Care: Gender, Empowerment and the Care Economy*. Journal of Human Development. Vol. 7, No. 2. July. Routledge, Taylor and Francis. 2006.

<sup>7</sup> V.Esquivel. (2013). *Care in Households and Communities: Background Paper on Conceptual Issues*. [oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/handle/10546/302287](https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/handle/10546/302287)

## 2.1 What is Work?

Unpaid care work calls for querying the concept of ‘work’ defined at the household and at the policy levels. It must look beyond assumptions of altruistic responsibilities of familial structures which inform definitions as to whose labour has socio- economic value and whose does not.

In mainstream economics “work” is labour that is remunerated or is carried out with the expectation of remuneration. Remuneration takes the form of payments (wages, salaries) on a regular or irregular basis made to individuals who are included in the labour force. The labour force is defined as including those above the age of 15 who are “economically active” i.e. engaged in or looking for work for payment during a specified period of time in which the national labour force survey is carried out. Persons who are so recorded are recognised as (potentially) contributing to the national economy.<sup>8</sup>

What gets overlooked in this approach to labour are the asymmetrical relations of social, economic, and political power that are embedded in assigned gender roles that effectively mask the labour of those engaged in the care of members of households.

The ability of an individual to engage in or, look for, work for monetary income is dependent on a number of factors: level of skill, level of education, availability of paid work, mobility, access to transport, access to raw materials, and the demands of the labour market in different sectors (agriculture, industry, services). It is also dependent on a person’s age, marital status, number of dependents in the family, and access to care services or support networks.

These socio-cultural factors determine the formation of the labour force and its effective market-based economic outcomes for the household as well as for the country. Gender relations and the sexual division of labour

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<sup>8</sup> The Economically Active Population: is defined as those persons who are/were employed or unemployed during the reference period of the survey.

Employed: Persons, who during the reference period, worked as paid employees, employers, own account workers, or unpaid family workers are said to be employed.

Unemployed: Persons who are seeking and available for work, but had no employment during the reference period.

Currently Economically Active: A person who was employed or unemployed during the current reference (one week) period is considered to be currently economically active.

Not in the Labour Force (not economically active): Persons who were neither working nor available/looking for work are classified as “not in the labour force”. Persons are not in the labour force for such reasons as; full time care of the household, full – time students, retired or old age, infirmed or disabled, or are not interested in working for one reason or another.

within households demarcate the extent and ways in which women and men access payment for their labour. It also determines who takes on the role of the family repository of unremunerated responsibility for expending labour and time to ensure the household members are “cared” for. For a woman to be able to look for and take up wage or salaried work, she has to ensure that the gendered “reproductive” work she is socially and politically “responsible” for is managed. When this is not possible, she may not take on direct paid work. Then she is automatically considered to be outside the labour force, economically inactive and, “engaged in housework”, despite the labour she expends to care work in the home.

A critical aspect of these definitions is the patriarchal norms and practices that frame the unit of the family-based household.

## **2.2 What is Family?**

The concepts of the family and the family-based household are centred on social structures and relationships of marriage and kinship. The household is viewed as constituting heteronormative families based on marital relationships with dependents (young and old), whose interactions with the economic and social spheres require interventions to ensure economic development and social and political stability. Normative practices and relationships of the family and the household are the focus or loci of the interplay of perceived and expected social roles of women and men, girls and boys. For example, the definition of “the family” can be seen in two functional aspects: (i) the focus of policy planning and administration of state social programmes- for example on welfare, social protection interventions (ii) political party manifestos.

Questions that emerge in this discussion are:

- How do the roles and responsibilities of families and households interact with other activities such as earning an income?
- How do social and public policies conceptualise care within the family-based household?
- How do social policies that target households through poverty alleviation programmes, elder care benefits, and disability care benefits envisage the distribution of care responsibilities within the household?

- Do these policies ensure that adequate funding for quality care services is made available and accessible for the beneficiary?
- Is there an acknowledgement or recognition that such policies should ensure adequate allocations of funds dedicated to reduce the burden of care borne by the primary carer in the household?
- Are there programmes designed for carers recognising the time and effort expended by such a person in the household?

Conceptualising “the family” is key to the planning of health care and, to much of social and public policy accompanying the overall development framework of the country. Concepts of “the family” are also utilised in political rhetoric in setting the direction of elected governments’ formulation of economic and social policy. These approaches are inherently patriarchal and gendered and do not acknowledge the dynamics of everyday negotiations between household members, in particular the care giver in the family, who has to bear the burden of household welfare.

## 2.3 Time Use Survey

Budlender (2010)) finds that Time Use Surveys (TUSs) are a good basis for discussing unpaid care work in more concrete terms, and how responsibility for this interacts with the performance of other activities such as earning an income.<sup>9</sup> In Bangladesh, a study looked at the hours of work expended by women and men in care, computing the economic value of this labour in order to: “*estimate the cost of unaccounted work performed by women and connect the findings with mainstream national accounting*”.<sup>10</sup> In Sri Lanka, the Department of Census and Statistics published its first Time Use Survey in 2020 which confirms the extended hours women engaged in unpaid care work compared to men<sup>11</sup>. The WMC study employed an extended coverage of care activities undertaken by women and men by means of a Time Use Survey to indicate simultaneous activities and the approximate actual hours that are spent by these household members.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Budlender D. (2010). Time Use Studies and Unpaid Care Work. [www.unrisd.org/en/library/publications/time-use-studies-and-unpaid-care-work](http://www.unrisd.org/en/library/publications/time-use-studies-and-unpaid-care-work)

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Policy Dialogue (2014). Estimating Women’s Contribution to the Economy: The Case of Bangladesh. Dhaka. <https://cpd.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Estimating-Women%E2%80%99s-Contribution-to-the-Economy-Study-Summary.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Department of Census and Statistics. (2020). Sri Lanka Time Use Survey. Final Report. [http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PressReleases/TUS\\_FinalReport\\_2017](http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PressReleases/TUS_FinalReport_2017)

<sup>12</sup> D. Gunawardena and A. Perera (2023). Included in this publication.

## ***Time Poverty***

The concept of time poverty, where women are unable to take up paid work because of the time and labour already expended in the care of household members extends the analysis of unpaid care work to identify more tangible factors in their lives. Time poverty also impacts on women's health, and reduces opportunities for women to engage in activities to voice their needs and concerns. As one study points out, women's time poverty must be addressed as a global, national moral imperative and a fundamental human right.<sup>13</sup>

## **3. The Chapters in this Publication**

The WMC and SSA felt that, following this research study, a space had opened up to further explore unpaid care work in Sri Lanka through a conference on the subject. The call for papers for the conference brought together presentations and analyses of unpaid care work from researchers and activists from different fora. It was a stepping stone in Sri Lankan discourse on gendered roles within family-based households, community relationships and critical need for informed public and social policy as integral to furthering women's rights and gender equality.

The papers selected for this publication explore hitherto "hidden" aspects of unpaid care work in Sri Lanka. These include findings about and, analysis of, women's engagement with household activities, gender identities, social networking, accessing of paid work in different sectors of the economy (including as overseas migrant workers) and, the use of social media messaging in unpaid care work.

### **3.1 Overview of Chapters**

Sepali Kottegoda and Pradeep Peiris in their chapter "Recognise, Reduce and Redistribute Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka: Key Findings" sets out the premise of the research on unpaid care work that was undertaken by the two organisations. It brings in the conceptual framework that informed the research and the wider theoretical explorations on the subject on unpaid care work including the importance of employing

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<sup>13</sup> J. Glob Health (2020). Time Poverty: Obstacles to women's human rights, health and sustainable development. [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33282212/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33282212/); Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy IWWAGE. (2021). Undoing Unpaid Work: Tackling Time Poverty is Key to Address Gender Inequality. [iwwage.org/undoing-unpaid-work-tackling-time-poverty-is-key-to-address-gender-inequality/](https://www.iwwage.org/undoing-unpaid-work-tackling-time-poverty-is-key-to-address-gender-inequality/)

Time Use Surveys for making assessments realistic. The chapter lays out the elements of ideological perceptions of a “universal” norm of “the family” and of “motherhood” which appear to inform social, public as well as economic policy in Sri Lanka. The chapter introduces the methodology that was designed for the survey and analysis and presents some of the key findings.

Chandima Arambepola’s chapter on “Only the mother will do: Analysis of state responses to women’s migration aspirations” critically evaluates the Family Background Report (FBR) system deployed by the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) to regulate and impose mobility restrictions on overseas aspiring migrant workers. Arambepola argues that the GoSL’s attempts to stop women from seeking work overseas mirrors the cultural and societal expectations of placing women as the primary caregiver of the family – a role that, normatively, cannot be substituted by anyone else in her absence.

In doing so, the GoSL has not only curbed women’s ability to make choices about types of employment and, also, restricted her choice to migrate. This approach is also undermining the Government’s own policy commitment to the much-vaunted ideal of ‘female empowerment’. It has set a dangerous precedent in limiting women’s choices. The chapter argues that, instead of devising measures to support and ensure that migrant domestic workers have job safety while working overseas, successive governments have focused on limiting the space these women have to seek work as foreign domestic workers and thereby earn a reasonable, sustainable income as a paid caregiver. The author brings examples from other parts of the globe where women have adopted multiple strategies to manage their transnational families from a distance such as the use of technology and “circular mothering” – a process where the migrant woman or the child would travel back and forth. The strategies adopted vary on the particular context and the physical distance to the family. The author observes that in Sri Lanka, while women’s migratory trajectories have received sustained attention over the years, the left-behind families have received more sustained attention in the recent past, leading to questions being raised regarding the wellbeing of the left-behind children.

The FBR introduced by the GoSL according to the author is one of the most emphatic and long-standing “bans” imposed on migrant women to date. The arbitrary introduction of a near blanket ban on women who wished to migrate was received with protests both locally and internationally and thereafter the FBR underwent various revisions. The continued imposition of such a restrictive regulation, in spite of

evidence that mobility restrictions are counter-productive, affects women in multiple ways. Their ability to make decisions about work, family and therefore productive and reproductive labour is curtailed; women must also contend with a bureaucratic structure that seeks to prevent them from migrating.

Michele Ruth Gamburd, in “Unpaid but Repaid: Generalized Reciprocity and Women’s Care Work in Rural Families”, interrogates the political economy of care, the inheritance of property, and the conferral of merit to argue that women’s care work, although unpaid, is often repaid in the context of the long-term social reproduction of the family. Drawing on qualitative interviews and participant observations in a coastal village of southwestern Sri Lanka between 2009 and 2019, the author explores intergenerational kinship obligations, the gendered performance of care work for children and elders, and the inheritance of property. The analysis focuses on women’s contributions to the social reproduction of the family. In the short-term, adult family members need to provide food, clothing, medicine, and other daily support for themselves, their children, and their elderly relatives. In the long-term, families need to acquire land, construct and maintain homes, educate children, and arrange marriages for young adults. Cultural expectations around gender and generation shape expected roles and responsibilities, with mothers, wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law fulfilling many culturally shaped care roles. The chapter considers how internal and international migration challenges older patterns of care work. This discussion of the cultural invisibility of unpaid care work makes useful theoretical contributions to feminist anthropology and political economics.

Dilani Gunewardena and Ashvin Perera in their chapter titled “Economic Value Assessment of the Women and Media Collective Study on Unpaid Care Work” explores why there is need to value unpaid work and questions whether a monetary value could accurately represent the worth of this work to its recipients, families and society. Data was collected in a unique in-depth quantitative survey of unpaid care work of 840 individuals in seven locations across six districts in Sri Lanka conducted by the Women and Media Collective and the Social Scientists’ Association in 2018-2020. Survey results revealed that the average time spent in all unpaid work in Sri Lanka for women is comparatively higher when compared to estimates in comparable studies done in Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America. There is considerable variation by district, as well as by educational level, of both the amount of time spent in unpaid work by men and women, as well as of the gender ratio of time spent in unpaid work. Women in



Badulla, Colombo and Kurunegala spent the most time in unpaid work, but women in Badulla and Colombo spent about twice as much time as men did, while in Kurunegala, women spent only about 25 percent more time than men. Men and women in lower educational categories spent about the same time in unpaid work, while the gender discrepancy in time use was largest in the professional category. Women with secondary education and graduates spent about 60-68 percent more time in unpaid work than men in those same educational categories, but men with postgraduate education engaged in more unpaid work than their female counterparts. In valuing unpaid work, the study has adopted the replacement cost method where a generalist wage could be calculated depending on the tasks performed. The study revealed that the value of unpaid work performed by the average woman is higher in all cases.

Sunimalee Madurawala's chapter "Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Recognizing, Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka" explores Sri Lanka's status of recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work and identifies the gaps and challenges for Sri Lanka in achieving SDG target 5.4. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted on 25th September 2015 at the United Nations General Assembly are a collection of seventeen interlinked global goals. Sri Lanka was one of the 193 member states agreeing on the summit's outcome document, 'Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Drawing from the main findings of the Department of Census and Statistics' first ever time use survey (TUS), the author makes a general observation that it is not any different from the rest of the world. According to the Department of Census and Statistics (2020), Sri Lankan women's participation in unpaid care work is more than that of men. The author further notes that the unpaid care work burden discourages women from engaging in income-earning activities. Moreover, a marginal difference can be noted in the time employed, and unemployed females spend on unpaid care and domestic activities. This also points to the "double burden" faced by employed females (the challenge of balancing employment and household responsibilities). Economically inactive females spend more time on domestic and care work than employed and unemployed females. The statistics further shows that when considering the time spent on unpaid care work by men and women in different sectors (employed, unemployed, economically inactive), in all three sectors, women's time contribution on unpaid care work is more than of men's. Women in the 25-44 age category have the highest time contribution to unpaid care work. Improved and better infrastructure enables the burden of unpaid care to be reduced.

Transforming social norms, engaging with men and boys, and providing affordable and accessible care services are vital approaches to redistributing unpaid care work. However, transforming the patriarchal Sri Lankan culture with its entrenched gender stereotyping is challenging, requiring sustained effort and time. Engaging men and boys is the first step toward such a transformation. Family-friendly policies which encourage a more egalitarian division of responsibilities and roles between men and women within households play a vital role in redistributing unpaid care work. The availability of childcare is one of the main determinants of women's economic participation, and the lack of informal childcare is more of a factor in the decision than the cost of formal childcare (Madurawala, 2009). Informal childcare includes seeking the help of their parents or parents-in-law or extended family to look after their children while they are away at work. Looking at the policy context of care work in Sri Lanka, the author notes that investing in infrastructure facilities that would ease the unpaid care burden of women is important in reducing and redistributing unpaid care work.

Dishani Senaratne's in her Chapter "Who else will do the housework?": The depiction of unpaid care work in memes" explores how memes depict women's lived experiences of unpaid care work in the Sri Lankan context and the underlying ideologies embedded in them. Consisting of four parts, the author first takes the readers through the theoretical underpinnings of unpaid care work by taking an evaluative and chronological assessment of the feminist waves that took place in the Global North and Europe and the resultant 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that highlighted for the first time formal global recognition of unpaid care work. The chapter further explores why unpaid care work often viewed as a female prerogative. The ideological division between the private and public realms gained traction in the early 19th century. Thus, the former was viewed as belonging to women, with the house being "pure, secure, and tranquil." The latter, on the other hand, was associated with men and was perceived as "impure, unpredictable, and turbulent." Despite a progressive rise in male labor market involvement, housework started to be considered as a female responsibility. Domesticity is still seen as the pinnacle of "feminine charm," perpetuating outdated gendered stereotypes.

Against a backdrop of many perspectives which attest to the complexity and vibrancy of the care job landscape, the chapter attempts to investigate how memes depict women's lived experiences of unpaid care work in the Sri Lankan context and the underlying ideologies embedded in them using a purposive sample of ten image- or text-based memes referencing aspects of unpaid care work that were originally

posted between January and June 2022 on Facebook. The sample of memes chosen for the study ranges from the invisibility of unpaid care work to motherhood martyrdom. Employing Shifman's (2013) communication-oriented typology of three memetic dimensions—content, shape, and stance as the analytical framework for the corpus of memes, in her analysis she observes that memes depicting unpaid care work are shaped by gender ideologies and in turn reproduce or challenge gender ideologies.

Velayudan Jayachithra's chapter "Social Media Interventions on unpaid care work: Perspectives from Women and Media Collective" looks at the advocacy on raising awareness on unpaid care work of the social media component of the study of the Women and Media Collective. Unpaid or unwaged women's labor in households is increasing gaining attention in discussions in the Sri Lankan social discourse. A set of tasks are identified as responsibilities to be shouldered by women for the wellbeing of their family members, encompassing their time and labor. It is a typical set of activities or work of care women are expected to perform as a part of domestic relationships. There is no specific appreciation or recognition in Sri Lanka for care work in terms of the physical labor or the hours of commitment that the caregiver expends on these activities. For the survival of the male-centered society, care work is associated with social norms such as 'noble motherhood', faithfulness to the family, or a cultural denoting of femininity. Stereotypical social roles of the woman in marriage and family, as well as cultural practices ensuring the fulfillment of these obligations in effect puts a heavy responsibility on women. across religious and ethnic divides. Multiple social opinions are at play to push the narrative that women are the individuals who are 'naturally' suitable to perform this set of work. Mass media in the country reflects without question, this role of women. Mass media fosters these socially standardized roles of women while spreading various myths cannot be left as being insignificant. Yet, society is not ready to admit the fact that the immense load of domestic work and care work performed by the woman in her daily life is "work with a labor cost". Media wholeheartedly highlight the demarcation of noble motherhood, of a woman's faithfulness to the family, that these activities are examples of love, kindness, or, that it the Karma of a woman and, a factor in perceived femininity of a woman. Here, the public should be made aware of the fact that household work and the care work performed by a woman are not the duties exemplifying femininity, but are in fact "work" expended by her by means of her labor and time. Within the popular discourse in this country, the tendency to highlight such alternative discourse is limited. It is a challenge to build up such discourse through the mass media

in our country. However, it is a timely need to make broader societal advocacy to address these critical aspects through alternative media. Educating on care work online can be observed across various aspects through social media for the purpose of advocacy.

Ahilan Kadrigamar, Suganya Kandeepan, Shafiya Rafaithu and Yathursha Ulakenthenran's chapter on "Re-thinking unpaid care work from the periphery: war-torn northern Sri Lankan women's challenges for livelihoods and social reproduction" discusses how certain livelihoods policies built along neoliberal principles such as financialisation and self-employment schemes have failed to yield expected results as the livelihood of marginalized women of Northern Sri Lanka have pushed them to endure precarious social and economic situations including indebtedness. As a result they engage in informal labour for income generation along with the care-work relating to children, elders and the disabled. Drawing from three recent action research initiatives, 'Women and Livelihoods in the Northern Province' for the Northern Co-operative Development Bank, 'Northern Muslim returnees and their livelihood possibilities through co-operatives' for GIZ, and 'Socio-Economic Conditions of Up-Country Origin People in Kilinochchi and Development of Women's Livelihoods through Co-operatives' for a University Research Grant of University of Jaffna, this paper explores the predicaments of marginalised women including the double burden they carry as care-givers and as income generators for their families.

As opposed to many claims that women do not engage in labour and production, the research in rural as well as economically marginalized communities in urban areas of northern Sri Lanka show otherwise. The communities in the North engage in complex economic activities, from rural agricultural livelihoods to urban informal services. These households of the working people rely on plurality of incomes generated by women, men, their children and the extended family. Further marginalised by identities like ethnicity, religion, and caste, women from these families are now slowly trying to rebuild their lives in places they were displaced from and now returned. However, their labour is often exploited and is left underpaid. In the rural and the urban North, lack of access to land, credit, and other resources push women to engage in low-wage labour to support the family. Resettling in the North after the war, many women had the responsibility of making their destroyed houses into homes. The chapter highlights the mismatches in the policies tailored in the centre in addressing the actual issues in the periphery by bringing to light the failed attempts at entrepreneurial projects pushed by international donors and their local partners.

K. Yogeshwari's chapter "The Value of Women and Unpaid Care Work in the Plantation Sector" explores the effect of unpaid care work and productive work burdens on the women engaged in the plantation sector of Sri Lanka. The continued existence of the family unit and the health of the national economy depend on care work, especially domestic work. Women have less time for paid job since they devote the majority of their time and resources to care work. International research studies have calculated the worth of women's care work to be between 10 and 39% of the nation's overall GDP and economy. Women put in an extensive amount of effort providing care for others, including serving as hosts and volunteering for community improvement projects. However, society devalues women's work, dismissing them as unemployed, and disregarding the importance of their contributions to the economy. Misconceptions about women's work lead to a lack of development programs addressing the needs of women, including health facilities and childcare centres.

The tea industry, true to its colonial root continues to employ workers who are descendants of South Indian laborers brought in by the British to cultivate coffee, tea, and rubber. While tea plantations in Sri Lanka are managed by the Janatha Estates Development Board and the Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation, plantations suffer from a lack of maintenance, resulting in reduced working days and a decrease in the number of factory workers. The number of workers in Sri Lanka's plantation sector has dramatically fallen since the privatization of the tea industry. The majority of the women who work in the plantation industry struggle to make a decent income. Families are becoming poorer as a result, which causes food shortages for children and an increase in school dropout rates. Women are overburdened with unpaid care work, household chores, and activities, leading to malnourishment and stress. Women workers in tea factories are denied many labour rights during night shifts, and tea pluckers are not provided fair pay or social recognition.

This paper is based a study that surveyed 20 people in Kandy, Matale, and Nuwara Eliya districts with objectives of assessing the value of women's unpaid work and challenges faced by them. Despite critical challenges in gathering information, researchers obtained data through interviews and online discussions This paper argues that women in State and privately managed plantations are not adequately paid for their labor and are thus exploited, exacerbating poverty in the estate sector. Plantation women spend long hours on household chores and care work without economic value or social recognition, having to endure a triple burden of productive, reproductive and community roles. Care work

done by plantation women is not reflected in national labor statistics, leading to insufficient progress in development in socio-political and economic spheres of plantation communities.

Kaushalya Ariyaratne and Thenu Ranketh in “Gendered Citizenship: Exploring the Dynamics of Gendered Labour and Unpaid Care Work Among Transgender Persons in Sri Lanka” explores how transgender spouses are affected by care work in general. Therefore, this article attempts to examine this gap by inquiring into the narratives of three selected transgender persons/couples who live with their partners in the same house, further problematising the concepts/notions of ‘woman’ and ‘family’. The purpose of this paper is to explore how self-perception of being a transgender person has affected the division of labour in the household. The three self-identified transgender respondents have gone through hormone/medical interventions and currently live with their married/unmarried partners. They were selected from three different locations in Sri Lanka through our personal connections. The discussions were held not with a rigid questionnaire, but as relaxed, long conversations. The respondents citing their experiences when they approached a psychiatrist to obtain Gender Recognition Certificates (GRC) recall how they were questioned on their engagement in gender specific household activities. This can be attributed to the gendered practices and beliefs of the larger society, which have always expected girls to be disciplined and modest, while resistance from young boys is permitted. As their upbringing is in stereotypical family environments, they carry forward such values and grow up understanding gender normative behaviours established within themselves. Most importantly, the medical professionals who support them for transition also continue to pass on these prejudices through their “assessments” of gendered behaviour. When moving from one gender binary to the other, these prejudices could be subtly appropriated by questions of the doctors.

The study notes that the perceptions about unpaid care work at home of all three respondents were interestingly parallel. They all expressed it as women’s primary responsibility. The case studies analysed in the chapter fall in line with West and Zimmerman’s (1978) claim that sex and gender are independent categories requiring analytical distinction. They conceptualized ‘doing gender’ as a “routine accomplishment embedded in every day interaction” (1978: 125).

## **Sepali Kottogoda and Pradeep Peiris**

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# Recognising Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka: Key Research Findings from Six Districts

Sepali Kottegoda & Pradeep Peiris

## 1. Introduction

Debates and discussions on unpaid care work have informed the conceptual framework for the research that was carried out by WMC with the SSA. WMC has been involved in feminist activism and advocacy for women's rights and gender equality for over three decades. In the late 1980s we produced a series of film slides on 'Women's Double Day'. At that time, while feminist discourses on unpaid care work were taking shape globally, in Sri Lanka, feminist activism and the focus on women's human rights was also unfolding.<sup>1</sup> With hindsight, it is now clear that WMC was already examining aspects of normative patriarchal practices of women's everyday lives and pushing for recognition that *housework is work*.

The Women and Media Collective conceptualised and carried out a six-district research study in Sri Lanka on unpaid care work during the period 2017-2020. WMC was a recipient of the Australian Awards Fellowship in 2017, facilitated by the Australian organisation JERA International. The WMC programme for this study tour in Australia was titled 'My Time, My Work, My Value: Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka'. WMC invited representatives of these organisations to form the team that visited Australia to learn about how paid and unpaid care are addressed in Australia by states, the private sector and NGOs; we were also able to visit and meet with officials at the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This exercise sharpened our understanding of government and private sector approaches and support for care facilities, for example, the elderly, as well as NGO engagement with advocacy for recognising

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Young, Carole Wolkowitz, Roslyn McCullagh. (1984): *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and its Lessons*, Routledge & Kegan Paul; Marilyn Waring (1999): *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, University of Toronto Press; M. Waring, (2014): *Who's Counting? The Value of Unpaid Work in the Global Economy*, <https://prezi.com/u9etqy3ozg6z/whos-counting/>

unpaid care work in Australia. It also touched on the complexities of acknowledging and formulating effective policies and programmes for support services for primary carers in families.

The research aimed at examining women's lives and the time spent on unpaid care work in different socio-economic settings that comprised urban, rural, plantation and post conflict areas in the country. A fundamental concern that led WMC into research on unpaid care work was the persistent argument from policy makers, economic analysts and most donor/international organisations that prevailing low rates of women's labour force participation in Sri Lanka is an obstacle for the development of the country.<sup>2</sup> This concern is often articulated by highlighting an evident contradiction of the Sri Lankan economy: low labour force participation of women<sup>3</sup> in a context of relatively high social development indicators such as universal free access to quality healthcare, gender neutral free access to education from primary school to University, subsidised public transport. This trend labour force participation has not substantially changed for several decades, ranging from 39.5 for females and 76.0 for males in 2006 to 31.8 for females and 71.0 for males in 2021.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the solution is seen as the need to design policies and programmes to draw women into the labour force. Among propositions to address this problematic are: encouraging women to take up home-based production for the market, enhancing and offering women marketable skills-upgrading programmes, the provision of childcare facilities for women to 'free' them to take up paid work. There has, however, been little focus on critical issues such as the disparate gender division of labour in households, social expectations of women's (sole) responsibility for the care and wellbeing of family members, on the economic value of this work done in the home, or the imperative of redistributing unpaid care work with men in households, which would more likely to allow women to take up paid work.

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<sup>2</sup> ILO (2016). Factors Affecting Women's Labour Force Participation. ILO Country Office for Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Colombo. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--asia/--ro-bangkok/--ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms\\_551675.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--asia/--ro-bangkok/--ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms_551675.pdf); Institute of Policy Studies. (2017). Women's Labour Force Participation in Sri Lanka: An Inquiry into the Key Social and Cultural Constraints. Colombo, February. <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2017/02/20/womens-labour-force-participation-in-sri-lanka-an-inquiry-into-the-key-social-and-cultural-constraints/>; Solotaroff, J. L.; Joseph, G.; Kuriakose, A.; Sethi, J. (2020). Getting to Work : Unlocking Women's Potential in Sri Lanka's Labor Force. Directions in Development—Countries and Regions;. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/151551583219126707/pdf/Getting-to-Work-Unlocking-Women-s-Potential-in-Sri-Lanka-s-Labor-Force.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 34.3 (2.9 million) compared to that of men - 65.7 (5.6 million). [statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/LabourForce/Bulletins/LFS\\_Q1\\_Bulletin\\_2022.pdf](https://www.statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/LabourForce/Bulletins/LFS_Q1_Bulletin_2022.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Department of Census and Statistics. Sri Lanka Labour Force Participation Survey. 2006 and 2021.

Our overall objective was to compile evidence-based research data to advocate for the recognition, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work in Sri Lanka. The aim was to build on feminist research and advocacy in Sri Lanka on the social and economic value of unpaid domestic and care work and on women's economic contributions to their households and to the national economy of the country.

For many Sri Lankan policy makers as well as researchers and activists the global debates on unpaid care work do not resonate with the social and economic imperatives of national priorities. There is confusion as to why we are critiquing the issue of care in families in Sri Lanka.

In one of our first discussions at WMC on the research project with Sri Lankan NGO representatives, there was initially anxiety among some as to why we were critiquing the issue of care in families in Sri Lanka. Because, conventionally, it is something women do because women love their families. This led to a number of productive discussions in the following weeks on understanding better that care-giving encompasses activities that do have elements of love and affection, but also are often imbued with gendered notions of altruism which position women as being solely responsible for giving of her time and energy for the wellbeing of the household. It was realised that it is essential to recognise not only the social importance of the actual time and effort that (mostly) women have to expend to execute their gendered responsibilities and the importance of reducing and redistributing these chores, but also to recognise the economic value of these factors, if gender equality is to be realised.

At the onset of this research, a conversation with a policy maker revealed a perception that unpaid care work is already covered in the Labour Force Survey under the category 'Contributing Family Worker'.<sup>5</sup> The fact that more than 60% of the female population above the age of 15 years are categorised as being outside the labour force because of being 'engaged in housework' was not considered relevant; because this work is not regarded as contributing to the economy of the country.

Bringing unpaid care work, its economic value, gender equality and the rights of women within the domestic context into the public and policy arena somewhat muddies the waters of most mainstreamed gender and development 'mantra' that giving women access to income earning opportunities alone was adequate for women's empowerment.

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<sup>5</sup> Contributing Family Workers who make their contribution to the economic activities carried out by their own households, without wages/salaries. [statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/LabourForce/Bulletins/LFS\\_Q1\\_Bulletin\\_2022.pdf](https://statistics.gov.lk/Resource/en/LabourForce/Bulletins/LFS_Q1_Bulletin_2022.pdf)

The WMC realised that there was thus a lacuna in these developmentalist approaches in Sri Lanka as well as a lack of critical understanding or acknowledgment of gendered power relations within households. It was time to build on evidence-based research data and to analyse the factors that keep women out of the labour force. The need was for more awareness on and strengthened advocacy to recognise the economic value of unpaid care work. We also felt that these factors would strengthen the arguments to expand the definition of “work” used in national labour force studies to include unpaid care work in the definition.

## 1.1. Field Research

The field research was carried out between the period 2018 and 2019 in the districts of Colombo, Gampaha, Kurunegala, Badulla, Kandy and Batticaloa<sup>6</sup>. We worked with six organisations in these districts with whom we have partnered previously in activities on women’s human rights. The extensive work that these organisations have been engaged in with different constituencies was an important consideration in this decision. The organisations were: Women’s Resource Centre, Kurunegala, Women’s Development Centre, Badulla, Da Bindu Collective, Gampaha, Diriya Saviya Kantha Sanvidanaya, Gampaha, Suriya Development Centre, Batticaloa, Working Women’s Front, Kandy, and WMC, Colombo.

The specific constituencies with which these organisations work were: women workers in the apparel industry in Free Trade Zones, rural women, women workers in the plantation sector, women in post conflict contexts, urban women and, returnee overseas migrant workers.

The research methodology was formulated and introduced by the SSA to these participating organisations and training given on social science-based field research methods. Two Divisional Secretariats (lowest administrative level) per district were selected from each district for the research locations. Interviews and case studies then conducted, and tabulation of collected data was carried out (see discussion on Methodology below).

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<sup>6</sup> Research samples were drawn from two Divisional Secretariat areas were selected from each district.

## 2. Concept of ‘Family’ in Mainstream Policy

The concept of the ‘family’ and the roles of women and men within the household inform much of economic policy imperatives as well as the framing of social policy. It is notable that the global Systems of National Accounts (SNA) continues to differentiate between labour expended in ‘productive’ activities for the market and, the unpaid labour expended in reproductive activities within households for the wellbeing of its members. This persistent technical practice at the world level itself clearly indicates that these socio-cultural perceptions of family and gender roles are not limited to policy makers in Sri Lanka.

This section briefly examines the concept of the family as espoused in select policy and political documents that frame the formulation of national policy and regulations.

### 2.1. ‘Family’ in Policy

Some examples:

- In 2010, the ‘Family Policy for Sri Lanka’ drafted by the Institute for Health Policy states:

“The family, as the basic unit of society, performs many functions in the development and well-being of its members. Families share resources, care for their members including children and elderly the sick, disabled and offer a nurturing environment to children in ways that no other institution can successfully provide”.<sup>7</sup>

- In 2010, the then government’s development framework, Sri Lanka: The Emerging Wonder of Asia, under its section on ‘A Caring Society’, focuses on women in the family and their contribution to the country. It states:

“Women as a Pioneer of Development: Sri Lankan woman has a comparatively better status in terms of literacy, health status and gender recognition. She holds the prime place in the family and is considered as the pioneer who drives the family towards a disciplined society. The contribution of women to the economy of the country is also highly significant”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Institute of Health Policy (2010). Family Policy for Sri Lanka. Ministry of Social Services. p.2

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Finance and Planning (2010). Sri Lanka: The Emerging Wonder of Asia. Mahinda Chinthana Vision of the Future. The Development Policy Framework. Government of Sri Lanka. Department of National Planning. Colombo. p. 186.

- The Family Background Report was introduced the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion in 2013. This regulation required prospective women migrant workers going overseas to show evidence that they do not have children under 5 years' age. This regulation applied only to women migrant domestic workers exemplifying both gender and class biases as well as social control aspects inherent in this compulsory procedure.<sup>9</sup> If the woman did have children under the age of 5, motherhood is deemed to take priority and she would not be permitted to take employment abroad. The role of fathers and of meaningful fatherhood is ignored in this discriminatory administrative practice. However, the current dire economic crisis that has afflicted the country since 2021, compelled the Government to suspend the FBR procedure and, mothers [insert here: ...routed through the Foreign Employment Bureau... ??] are now permitted to migrate overseas for employment. There is as yet no regulation or policy that addresses the redistribution of childcare among the family's adult males or other household members.
- The Presidential Election Manifesto of then President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2010 places the subject of the family under the Section 'Disciplined and Law Abiding Society'<sup>10</sup>:

“A Prosperous Family: The very existence of the world depends on the affection and love of the mother. It is through this affection and love that children acquire a healthy mind and a balanced personality. It is my belief that whatever may be achievements, our focus should be on the family consisting of the mother, father and the children. Pride of place to the mother: Women make a major contribution to the economy of our country. The contribution of women in the plantation sector, in foreign employment and the apparel sector has increased in significance over the years. In such a context, I believe that the women in our country should not be afforded ‘equal’ status but should be given ‘higher priority.’”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> IPS. Sri Lanka State of the Economy 2015. [https://www.ips.lk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IPS\\_SOE\\_Migration\\_2015.pdf](https://www.ips.lk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IPS_SOE_Migration_2015.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Mahinda Chinthana: A Brighter Future. A Vision for the Future. Towards a new Sri Lanka (2010). [file:///C:/Users/ACER/Downloads/pdfs/lide.net\\_mahinda-chintana-brighter-future-presidential-election-2010-mahinda-chintana.pdf](file:///C:/Users/ACER/Downloads/pdfs/lide.net_mahinda-chintana-brighter-future-presidential-election-2010-mahinda-chintana.pdf); [https://www.preventionweb.net/files/mahinda\\_chintana\\_vision\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_eng%5B1%5D.pdf](https://www.preventionweb.net/files/mahinda_chintana_vision_for_the_future_eng%5B1%5D.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p.22



## 2.2. Divergent Social Norms and Expectations

The examples above are selected here to illustrate the underlying value-based construction of gender roles within the social unit of the family. The family is presented as a harmonious unit where the responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of its members rest with women. Words such as ‘nurture’, ‘affection’, ‘love of the mother’ are recurrent and powerful images. There is no tangible role envisaged for the ‘father’ of the family. Women contribute to the economy through employment but these policy declarations and manifestos are silent on the value of the unpaid work performed by women.

Mothers and motherhood are now normative socio-economic and political frames for conceiving Welfare, Development, and, for public and social policy.

However, what is not acknowledged is that the ascribed roles and responsibilities and, the differential access to resources (food, education, healthcare) and power (positioning) in a hierarchy of decision-making in the household, affecting some or all members of the family/household, effectively demarcate the provision of care for household members. Women are expected to and often do fit into these ‘care’ roles.

For example, during conversations with women community organizers in Sri Lanka on understanding unpaid care work, they observed that:

“If a woman has a job/is employed, there are times when men or other household members would share some elements of housework because they understood that she was ‘tired after working’. But, if the woman is a full-time housewife, she is not seen to bring money into the household, and such consideration or support was markedly absent.”

At another discussion on raising awareness on the value of unpaid care work with a group of women and men from rural-based organisations, a young man asked: “so, do you expect me to now pay my wife for the work she is supposed to do anyway?” There is an intertwining of cultural norms about family responsibilities and of the monetized social constructs of gender that result in a continued invisibility/obscuring of women’s unpaid care work.

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<sup>12</sup> Ferrant, Gaelle, Luca Maria, and Keiko Nowacka. (2014). Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes. Washington: OECD Development Centre

### 3. Methodology

The study of unpaid care work has, at its core, dual Feminist commitments:- (a) demonstrating the structural conditions that prevent women from participating in life on terms equal with men in comparable socio-economic situations; and, (b) recognising and valuing the work women perform, work on which hinges much of other kinds of work. Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka (2014)<sup>12</sup> observe how women's disproportionately greater role in performing unpaid care work translates into gendered gaps in "labour outcomes ...[such as] labour force participation, wages and job quality" (1). This means that "[e]very minute more that a woman spends on unpaid care work represents one minute less that she could be potentially spending on market-related activities or investing in her educational and vocational skills" (2). As Kandasamy (2023) succinctly brought to light the need to recognise unpaid care work: "What people don't realise, particularly men, is that it's not magic. If men want to go to work tomorrow, today they have to sleep in a clean place, they have to eat, have to take a bath, change clothes; it's not all just happening."

In the interest of fulfilling these dual commitments, this study sought to numerically capture the unpaid care work performed by women living in different contexts across Sri Lanka. To this end, it employed a two-pronged method. To capture the objective picture of the status of unpaid care work, a complex quantitative survey was conducted in five locations across five sample districts, namely, Kurunegala, Gampaha, Kandy, Batticaloa, and Colombo. A qualitative study was also conducted to inquire into the larger questions posed by the survey research as well as to obtain a more nuanced picture of unpaid care work in Sri Lanka.

#### 3.1. Quantitative Study

The quantitative study comprised two components: a questionnaire and, a diary. The questionnaire was administered among 840 individuals across five locations in the selected five districts to capture the socio-economic and cultural background of the study participants, in addition to their employment status and daily work routine. As the study focuses on women's unpaid care work, a total of 696 interviews were conducted among women who belong to different ethnic, age, income, and urban-rural groups. For the purpose of comparison, a survey among 144 men from the selected five locations was also conducted. Like in the case of the women, the male sample too was designed to capture different ethnic

and income groups, among other things. The tables below describe the exact composition of the sample in terms of gender, monthly household expenditure, civil status, highest educational level, and the number of residents in the household.

The Diary was a research tool used to assess the time that is spent on unpaid care work by those who are the designated 'primary household members. This method was informed by the literature on Time Use Surveys (TUS). The questionnaire for the quantitative survey was framed by the following factors, in order to better understand the varying structural conditions in which care work is performed, and how these conditions impact such work.

### 3.2. Aspects of the Study

**Household economy:** Previous studies have shown that, according to income levels, there are significant changes in the duration of 'household overhead time', that is, the time that is spent on transforming raw material to consumable goods and providing a clean and healthy environment (Harvey and Taylor 2000)<sup>13</sup>. This is because income determines a household's access to goods, services, and technologies which, in turn, determines the time spent on unpaid work (Hirway 2005<sup>14</sup>; Blackden and Wodon 2006<sup>15</sup>). Since ascertaining the precise income bracket of a household is usually more difficult than eliciting information about its expenditure, the survey asked respondents to indicate their average monthly expenditure rather than income, which still makes it possible to locate them within a specific bracket in the wealth continuum.

**Civil status:** The nexus between a woman's civil status and the possibility of being engaged in waged employment assumes that married women (or women with offspring to take care of) will have more demands placed on their time because of greater care responsibilities than single women (Budlender 2010),<sup>16</sup> thus increasing the likelihood of

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<sup>13</sup> A. S. Harvey, & M.E. Taylor. (2000). Time Use. In Grosh, M. & P. Glewwe (Eds.). *Designing Household Survey Questionnaires for Developing Countries: Lessons from Fifteen Years of the Living Standards Measurement Study*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank

<sup>14</sup> I. Hirway. (2005, Oct. 5). *Understanding Poverty: Insights Emerging From Time Use of the Poor*. UNDP-Levy Institute Conference, Unpaid Work and Economy: Gender, Poverty, and the Millennium Development Goals. The Levy Institute of Bard College, New York

<sup>15</sup> C.M. Blackden, & Q. Wodon (Eds.). (2006). *Gender, Time-Use and Poverty in SubSaharan Africa*. Working Paper 73. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank

<sup>16</sup> D. Budlender. (Ed.). (2010). *Time Use Studies and Unpaid Care Work*. Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis

the former category not being engaged in salaried jobs. One reason for this is because “child care represents a substantial potential cost of employment” in both emotional and economic terms (Ribar 1992, p. 135),<sup>17</sup> lowers the mother’s net hourly wage (Connelly 1992)<sup>18</sup> and, thereby, discourages those women particularly with small children from entering the labour force. In addition, in countries like China, research shows that caring for parents-in-law takes a much heavier toll on a woman’s employment status and work hours as compared with caring for her own parents (Liu et al 2010).<sup>19</sup> To examine the function of these dynamics in the local context, this section focuses on the willingness as well as ability of women to participate in the formal economy depending on their civil status.

**Education:** Education is typically seen as a means by which greater entry of women into the formal economy, on more favourable terms than at present, may be facilitated. The assumption is that greater educational attainment will enable the formation of skills that match market requirements, thus increasing prospects of favourable employment conditions. As such, a greater care burden gets in the way of women enjoying more life opportunities particularly in terms of education (Marphatia and Moussie 2013).<sup>20</sup> In other words, “every minute more that a woman spends on unpaid care work represents one minute less that she could be potentially spending on market-related activities or investing in her educational and vocational skills” (Ferrant et al 2014, p. 1). The requirement that girls stay back at home and assist their mothers and older female relatives with care work at the cost of schooling is a globally pervasive phenomenon (ILO 2009),<sup>21</sup> and suggests how structurally entrenched the issue actually is. This section interrogates the impact of education on the inclination to be engaged in waged employment, as well as the impact of care responsibilities on women with different educational qualifications and their ability to be engaged in a salaried job.

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<sup>17</sup> D.C. Ribar. (1992). Child Care and the Labor Supply of Married Women: Reduced Form Evidence. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 27(1), pp. 134-165

<sup>18</sup> R. Connelly. (1992). The Effect of Child Care Costs on Married Women’s Labor Force Participation. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 74(1), pp. 83-90

<sup>19</sup> L. Liu., Dong, X. & Zheng, X. (2010). Parental Care and Married Women’s Labor Supply in Urban China. *Feminist Economic*, 16(3), pp. 169-192

<sup>20</sup> A.A. Marphatia, & R. Moussie. (2013). A question of gender justice: Exploring the linkages between women’s unpaid care work, education, and gender equality. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33, pp. 585-594

<sup>21</sup> ILO. (2009). *Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work*, Report VI. Geneva: Switzerland

**Ethnicity:** The intersection between ethnic minorities, gender, and poverty has been well documented (for example see Glenn 1985; Touminen 1994; Yeandle et al 2012). Recent research also focuses particularly on the role of care work in this equation, in terms of both its paid and unpaid variants. In addition to these, attention has also been paid to the distribution of unpaid care responsibilities among women of different ethnic groups.<sup>22</sup>

The current study included representatives of the main ethnic groups in the country - Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim women and men from the selected districts. It was recognised that the sample from the Western Province was multi ethnic while population from the plantation sector in the Central Province and from Eastern Provinces were predominantly Tamil and Tamil speaking. Sri Lanka's colonial plantation history has left a legacy of a supply of domestic workers from the plantation sector, where poverty rates are among the highest in the country, to the urban centres in the South.

**Attitudes:** Dual-earner households are fast replacing breadwinner-homemaker families, introducing new conflicts around the issue of division of labour in organizing everyday life (Edlund and Oun 2016). In this scenario, how people feel about changing gender roles and norms can have a decisive impact on how care work is perceived and distributed. Previous research has established that more gender-equal policies at the macro level, more involvement of women in the labour force, and a culture of affluence and individualism are positively related to more gender-egalitarian attitudes (Crompton et al 2005; Wilensky 2002).<sup>23</sup> Further, secularism and education are also identified as highly conducive for attitudes that support equal division of labour between women and men (Salin et al 2018).<sup>24</sup> As a society whose value base does not accommodate most of these traits, Sri Lankan attitudes towards gender-based division of labour tend to tilt more towards the traditional understanding of it. The discussion below considers the will and ability of women to be engaged in paid employment in relation to a range of attitudes, as well as the nexus between their exposure and agency.

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<sup>22</sup> S. Yeandle, B. Stiell, & L. Buckner. (2012). Ethnic Minority Women and Access to the Labour Market – Synthesis Report. Retrieved from <https://pvac-sites.leeds.ac.uk/circle/files/2012/09/bme-women-synthesis.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> R. Crompton, M. Brockmann, & Lyonette, C. (2005). Attitudes, women's employment and the domestic division of labour: A cross-national analysis in two waves. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(2), pp. 213–233

<sup>24</sup> M. Salin, M. Ylikännö & Hakovirta, (2018). How to divide paid work and unpaid care between parents? Comparison of attitudes in 22 Western countries. *Social Sciences*, 7(10), pp. 1-20

<sup>25</sup> R. Antonopoulos. (2008). The unpaid care work-paid work connection (Working Paper No. 541). New York: Levy Economics Institute of Bard College

**Other household factors:** Irrespective of her civil status, a woman's care burden is significantly affected by the *number of residents in the household*. An increased number may not always indicate an increased care burden, however, as some members of the family might actually be part of her support structure in delivering care responsibilities (such as girl children and/ or female relatives).

Caring for *dependent residents* of a household, such as under-age children, elders, and those with special needs, “places an enormous time-tax on some people asymmetrically, particularly on women, and especially on poor women ... which limits other aspects of social engagement” (Antonopoulos 2008).<sup>25</sup> The ‘social engagements’ referred to here, denote a range of activities encompassing regular associational life, political involvement, artistic expression, skill upgrading, and paid employment, among other things (ibid). As such, obtaining a quantitative sense of how much time is spent on such tasks is crucial for (1) taking this kind of care work seriously by including them in formal economics statistics and (2) making a case for women caught up in performing these tasks to enter into other spheres of life, in particular social life.

*Support systems* refer to formal care services as well as informal support networks. Formal services such as day care centers, elders' homes, and facilities for those with special needs, entail a monetary cost. Access to such systems frees up a considerable amount of women's time otherwise spent on care work, thus making it possible for them to concentrate more on other spheres of life and invest in skill development if they so wish. However, the logic and philosophy behind support systems have a significant impact on the care work performed by women. For instance, in China, reform policies of 1989 that restructured publicly subsidized childcare programmes were focused exclusively on early childhood education, rather than on supporting working women, to the effect that the new system no longer accepted children of up to two years of age as it was believed that formal education was unimportant for this age bracket (Cook and Dong 2011). The other dimension to this problem, which is also relevant to provision for elder care, is that while these facilities relieve some of the burden of the women of middle and upper middle-class families, the care work has simply been transferred to women of lower income families (ibid).

Informal support systems are key to particularly low-income women's ability to manage household care activities by being able to draw on kin and affine relations within the neighbourhood. As this research shows, there is an underlying expectation and trust that such support will be available as part of the social relationships among neighbours.

*Domestic help services* is looked at, in this research, from the perspective of the service receiver rather than the provider. The latter's case warrants an entirely different study on the intersection between poverty and gender, and the perpetuation of feminized poverty it gives rise to, as well as the additional complication introduced by the element of care work in this equation (see Peberdy and Dinat 2005; Hoang et al 2008; Mabala and Cooksey 2008; Tokman 2010).<sup>26</sup> Here the focus is on the availability and use of domestic help by women in their daily lives, and its impact on the care responsibilities they perform as suggested by the data.

### 3.3 Diary

Although the daily work routine of women and men was included in the initial survey, this study also made use of a two-wave panel survey to discern the actual time women and men spend on various activities during an average day. Prior research has noted that the 'diary' approach yields more accurate and detailed results than a questionnaire, given the format of descriptive log entries over numerous days, as opposed to a stand-alone interview at a specific point in time (see Charmes 2019<sup>27</sup>; Budlener 2010<sup>28</sup> and 2007<sup>29</sup>; Bittman and Wacjaman 2004<sup>30</sup>). When used in combination with a questionnaire that helps structurally situate the findings, the value of the diary method is further enhanced, as was the case in the present study.

In this research, those who participated in the initial survey were recruited as panelists and each was given a diary to record the actual time they spend on various activities (25 items were listed, based on current

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<sup>26</sup> S. Peberdy, & N. Dinat. (2005). Migration and domestic workers: worlds of work, health and mobility in Johannesburg, Southern Africa. Cape Town: Migration Project; Hoang, X.T., Thi, T.P.D., & Nguyen, T.H. (2008). Urbanization, fruit production and rural livelihood transformations in the Mekong Delta Rural-Urban Interactions (Working Paper 14). London: IIED; R. Mabala, & B. Cooksey. (2008). Mapping adolescent vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in Dar es Salaam: results of an exploratory study. Joint Learning Initiative on Children and AIDS; V.E. Tokman,. (2010). Domestic workers in Latin America: statistics for new policies. Manchester: WIEGO

<sup>27</sup> J. Charmes,. (2019). The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market: An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys. Geneva: International Labour Organization

<sup>28</sup> D. Budlener. (Ed.). (2010). Time Use Studies and Unpaid Care Work. Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis

<sup>29</sup> D. Budlener. (2007). A Critical Review of Selected Time Use Surveys. Programme on Gender and Development (Paper No. 2). Geneva: UNRISD

<sup>30</sup> M. Bittman and J. Wajeman. (2004). The rush hour: The quality of leisure time and gender equity. In N. Folbre and M. Bittman (Eds.). Family Time: The Social Organization of Care (171-194). London: Routledge

methodology literature) during the course of the day. After a period of one week, the diaries were handed over to the field researchers, and the exercise was repeated after one month. The main objective of the diary exercise was to accurately calculate the average time spent by each individual on a given set of activities during the course of an average day. By repeating the diary after a month's lag, the study managed to avoid potential seasonality of daily work routines, specifically of those who are engaged in farming or similar activities that have seasonal patterns. This study thereby managed to capture the average time spent on various activities very accurately.

### **3.4 Survey Process**

Due to the nature of the study theme, WMC collected data using its partner organizations in the respective districts. A total of selected 20 individuals from these organizations were given two residential trainings prior to data collection. The first training focused on the unpaid care work concept and feminist research approaches. The second workshop provided a two-day residential training for 20 researchers on the questionnaire, survey methodology, research ethics, and field research techniques. Under the supervision of the main field coordinator, field work in each district was conducted under the supervision of district coordinators. In order to improve the quality of the field work, the main survey team visited selected households where diaries were filled. A debriefing session was held in the middle of the field work period to discuss the challenges faced and actions to improve the quality of the field work.

Completed questionnaires and diaries were scrutinized by the chief field coordinator. With the help of field researchers, each form and diary was cleaned before being entered into data bases for the analysis. Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

## **4. Key Findings**

### **4.1. Data**

The survey respondents were selected on criteria relating to household income, respondents' marital status, level of education, willingness to take up paid work, reasons for not looking for paid work and time use data on daily involvement of Systems of National Accounts (SNA) and Non-SNA work.



**Table 1:** Average monthly household expenditure breakdown of the sample by sex

Average monthly household expenditure	Sex	
	Male	Female
Less than 20,000 LKR	6.3%	20.5%
20,001 – 50,000 LKR	56.9%	50.1%
50,001 – 100,000 LKR	29.9%	26.0%
100,001 – 150,000 LKR	4.2%	2.2%
More than 150,000 LKR	2.8%	0.7%
No Responses	0.0%	0.4%
Base	144	696

The monthly expenditure of approximately more than 50% of households was on average between Rs 20,001 – 50,000 LKR on monthly basis.

**Table 2:** Civil status breakdown of the sample by sex

Civil status	Sex	
	Male	Female
Married	91.7%	47.7%
Single	6.3%	27.7%
Separated	1.4%	11.5%
Widowed	0.0%	12.2%
Other	0.7%	0.9%
Base	144	696

The majority of the respondents were married. The female sample showed a variation in civil status with single women being the second significant category. These points are useful when we examine the distribution of care work within households in relation to marital status.

**Table 3:** Education breakdown of the sample by sex

Highest education level of the respondents	Sex	
	Male	Female
Up to grade 5	4.9%	9.2%
Up to grade 8	10.4%	13.6%
Up to O/L	45.1%	47.4%
Up to A/L	22.9%	19.4%
Graduate	6.9%	3.2%
Vocational qualification	4.9%	1.6%
Professional	2.1%	0.9%
Post-graduate degree holder	0.7%	0.6%
No Responses	2.1%	4.2%
Base	144	696

Table 3 shows that the most of the women and men had levels of education from Grade 5 up to Advanced Levels (high school). The majority of women and men had studied up to Ordinary Levels.

**Table 4:** Number of residents in the household of the sample by sex

Number of residents in the household	Sex	
	Male	Female
1 to 2 Family Members	15.9%	15.7%
3 to 4 Family Members	46.4%	46.7%
5 to 6 Family Members	26.8%	28.9%
7 and above Family Members	10.9%	8.7%
Base	138	688

The survey looked at the size of households, in terms of number of residents. Table 4 shows that the majority of the families comprise three to four family members. Only one third of families had more than five members with in their family.

**Table 6****Ethnic breakdown of the sample by sex**

Ethnicity	Sex	
	Male	Female
Sinhala	56.9%	59.6%
Tamil	31.9%	30.5%
Muslim	6.3%	5.3%
Can't trace	4.9%	4.6%
Base	144	696

The sample consisted of the three major ethnic groups of Sri Lanka. Due to this diversity of the sample it helped to identify some socio-cultural aspects of unpaid care work.

TABLE 6: Reasons for not undertaking paid work by sex

**Table 7****Reasons for not undertaking paid work by sex**

Responses		Sex	
		Male	Female
01	Could not find a job	50.0%	37.7%
02	My health does not permit it	25.0%	11.9%
03	There is no one to take care of the children	0.0%	54.7%
04	There is no one to take care of the parents	0.0%	11.9%
05	There is no one to attend to household chores	25.0%	30.2%
06	My spouse does not like	0.0%	15.1%
07	My children do not like	25.0%	2.5%
08	Other (please specify)	0.0%	2.5%
	Base	4	159

Of those who were willing to be engaged in paid work, 50% of the men and 49% of women said they could not find a job. When further probed, it was found that responsibility for care work was the primary factor for women's and men's perceptions on ability to take up paid work. While 50% of men stated that they were not in paid work because they could not find a job, 25% were not in paid work due to household chores responsibilities. However, 37.7% of women said they were not in paid work because they could not find a job, but more than 96.8% of females not in paid work due to responsibilities of taking care of children, of parents and household chores. Of them 54.7% of women stated that there was no one to take care of children and 11.9% as there is no one to take care of the parents. These factors were not cited by men as causes for not taking up paid work.

## 4.2 Time Use Survey

A major component of this research was the extensive Time Use Survey that was carried out with all respondents. This volume includes a detailed analysis and a computing of the value of time expended on unpaid care work in the Chapter by Dileni Gunawardena and Aswin Perera.

The data indicates that the amount of time spent per day by married women's in System of National Account (SNA)<sup>31</sup> activities (327.51) minutes is relatively low compared to single (446.29), separated (509.84) or widowed (436.78) women.

The time spent on non-SNA activities, directly relating to care work as seen in Table 7 however, shows that marital status has a clear impact on the time and labour expended by women in care activities. Married women spent 971.21 minutes per day on these activities compared to 499.97 minutes by single women. The gendered nature of care responsibilities is further illustrated by the 766.59 minutes and 806.19 minutes that separated and widowed women spent on these activities.

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<sup>31</sup> SNA is a classification of institutional sectors used globally in assessing data for census surveys.

**Table 7****Average minutes spent on tasks daily,  
crossed by civil status: Women**

Ethnicity	Civil status				
	Married	Single	Separated	Widowed	Other
<b>SNA activities</b>					
Q9AT 9. Income from work outside the home	177.46	298.60	304.24	267.38	122.22
Q10AT 10. Income from work from home	107.38	102.20	138.45	133.15	189.56
Q11AT 11. Home gardening/ agricultural activity with family members' help	35.77	36.71	57.94	31.37	31.25
Q13AT 13. Taking care of elders (for payment)	6.97	8.78	9.21	4.88	0.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>327.57</b>	<b>446.29</b>	<b>509.84</b>	<b>436.78</b>	<b>343.04</b>
<b>Non-SNA activities</b>					
Q1AT 1. Cooking	106.35	79.42	89.90	93.64	97.39
Q2AT 2. Washing utensils/ cleaning kitchen	48.10	38.41	49.37	44.69	25.38
Q3AT 3. Cleaning house/ garden, repair work	46.43	44.69	46.83	48.30	31.15
Q4AT 4. Taking care of elders (voluntary)	77.58	57.91	29.69	60.13	7.50
Q5AT 5. Taking care of children (own)	341.86	20.23	175.24	227.99	209.88
Q6AT 6. Taking care of children (family members)	71.08	52.43	95.04	62.49	30.00
Q7AT 7. Taking care of children of other households (voluntary)	25.80	23.52	16.92	18.56	7.50
Q8AT 8. Buying groceries for household	57.06	50.15	53.15	71.01	55.00
Q12AT 12. Helping with the chores of other households (voluntary)	30.22	23.60	42.12	31.26	48.75
Q21AT 21. Medical care (for self or family member)	66.04	56.62	73.27	57.44	183.75
Q22AT 22. Washing clothes (own or of family members)	51.21	41.28	47.71	49.38	46.98
Q24AT 24. Helping the children with their school work	49.48	11.72	47.33	41.31	72.92
<b>Total</b>	<b>971.21</b>	<b>499.97</b>	<b>766.59</b>	<b>806.19</b>	<b>816.20</b>

Ethnicity	Civil status				
	Married	Single	Separated	Widowed	Other
<b>Personal activities</b>					
Q14AT 14. Reading	40.48	43.75	44.51	36.81	22.68
Q15AT 15. Entertainment (listening to music, watching tele-dramas, etc.)	78.48	90.52	82.94	76.76	87.18
Q16AT 16. Participating in village-level associations	33.46	24.85	33.28	41.14	75.00
Q17AT 17. Visiting relatives	77.64	75.88	68.28	66.90	37.08
Q18AT 18. Bathing/ washing	49.60	45.14	48.18	46.61	35.24
Q19AT 19. Entertaining guests	45.22	47.95	37.14	41.91	49.58
Q20AT 20. Hobbies (outside of house)	39.32	33.15	23.52	28.67	45.00
Q23AT 23. Religious activities	41.64	35.57	55.41	39.28	59.85
Q25AT 25. Exercising	13.69	10.85	12.66	7.75	7.50
Q26AT 26. Other	73.34	77.19	86.09	66.36	266.38
<b>Total Number of Minutes</b>	<b>492.88</b>	<b>484.85</b>	<b>492.00</b>	<b>452.19</b>	<b>685.49</b>

### 4.3: Gendered Attitudes towards Household Responsibilities

The study presented respondents with a series of statements in order to capture socio-cultural attitudes towards household responsibilities. This section presents responses to two statements correlated by Sex, Education, Age, and by District.

#### 4.3A Statement: “Women should not go to work after marriage” \*

Table 8 shows women’s and men’s expectations of marriage and engaging in paid work were looked at in relation to the level of education of respondents. 47% women out of 95 with education up to Grade 8 completely disagreed with the statement, while 36% of the 11 men in the same educational level ‘Completely Agreed’ with the statement. However, 81% out of 85 women with a level of education up to Advanced Level and above completely disagreed with the statement indicates that access to longer engagement in education while 50% of the 24 men in this level of education, completely disagreed with the statement.

**Table 8****Crosstabulation by Education and Sex – “Women should not go to work after marriage”**

Responses (%)	Education Level							
	Up to grade 8		Up to O/L		Up to A/L		A/L+	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Completely Agree	36	<b>22</b>	32	<b>10</b>	29	<b>7</b>	0	<b>2</b>
Somewhat Agree	36	<b>17</b>	29	<b>17</b>	24	<b>15</b>	8	<b>5</b>
Somewhat Disagree	9	<b>14</b>	15	<b>19</b>	12	<b>13</b>	42	<b>12</b>
Completely Disagree	18	<b>47</b>	24	<b>54</b>	34	<b>64</b>	50	<b>81</b>
Base	11	<b>95</b>	66	<b>325</b>	41	<b>172</b>	24	<b>85</b>

\*Statement 8

**Table 9****Crosstabulation By Age and Sex - “Women should not go to work after marriage”**

Responses (%)	Age category									
	18-29 Years		30-39 Years		40-49 Years		50-59 Years		60+ Years	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Completely Agree	21	<b>8</b>	33	<b>9</b>	16	<b>12</b>	27	<b>8</b>	29	<b>17</b>
Somewhat Agree	33	<b>13</b>	16	<b>15</b>	32	<b>12</b>	18	<b>20</b>	29	<b>22</b>
Somewhat Disagree	21	<b>15</b>	20	<b>14</b>	19	<b>19</b>	9	<b>17</b>	0	<b>22</b>
Completely Disagree	24	<b>63</b>	31	<b>62</b>	32	<b>56</b>	45	<b>56</b>	43	<b>39</b>
Base	33	<b>153</b>	61	<b>260</b>	31	<b>161</b>	11	<b>66</b>	7	<b>41</b>

Table 9 shows that the younger female respondent, the more likely that they would completely disagree with the statement; 63% of women in the age group 18-29 rejected the statement compared to 22% of those 60 years and above. However, there was a relative uniformity of attitudes among men with 21% between 18-29 years and 29% of men 60 years and above completely agreed with the statement.

**Table 10****Crosstabulation By District and Sex -  
“Women should not go to work after marriage”**

Response (%)	Districts													
	Badulla		Batticaloa		Colombo		Gampaha (FTZW)		Gampaha (M W)		Nuwara Eliya		Kurunegala	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Completely Agree	5	1	30	10	24	10	9	20	50	16	15	5	48	8
Somewhat Agree	40	12	20	6	19	15	38	21	28	22	0	10	26	18
Somewhat Disagree	5	5	10	11	33	24	24	25	6	22	25	11	22	15
Completely Disagree	50	82	40	72	24	50	29	34	17	41	60	73	4	59
Base	20	100	20	97	21	95	21	96	18	102	20	98	23	96

Table 10 shows between 34% and 82% of female respondents from across the districts completely disagreed with the statement. From among male respondents, between 4 and 60% completely disagreed with the statement.

4.4B Statement: “The responsibility of child rearing should be equally divided between the man and the woman” (Statement 7)

Respondents were asked their opinion on parental sharing of childcare. Most notable is the fact that men and women, irrespective of level of education, age and across districts completely agreed with the statement as can be seen in Tables 12, 13 and 14.

**Table 11****Crosstabulation by Level of Education and Sex –  
“The responsibility of child rearing should be equally divided  
between the man and the woman”**

Responses (%)	Education Level							
	Up to grade 8		Up to O/L		Up to A/L		A/L+	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Completely Agree	82	85	82	90	90	89	79	93
Somewhat Agree	18	9	13	8	10	9	17	6
Somewhat Disagree	0	2	1	0	0	1	4	1
Completely Disagree	0	3	3	1	0	2	0	0
Base	11	96	67	329	41	175	24	86



**Table 12****Crosstabulation by Age and Sex - “The responsibility of child rearing should be equally divided between the man and the woman”**

Responses (%)	Age category									
	18-29 Years		30-39 Years		40-49 Years		50-59 Years		60+ Years	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Completely Agree	76	91	89	91	84	84	73	89	100	90
Somewhat Agree	21	7	10	6	10	10	27	92	0	10
Somewhat Disagree	3	0	2	1	0	2	0	0	0	0
Completely Disagree	0	2	0	1	6	4	0	1	0	0
Base	33	156	62	265	31	163	11	65	7	41

**Table 10****Crosstabulation By District and Sex - “Women should not go to work after marriage”**

Response (%)	Districts													
	Badulla		Batticaloa		Colombo		Gampaha (FTZW)		Gampaha (M W)		Nuwara Eliya		Kurunegala	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Completely Agree	10	91	90	97	81	85	77	75	100	99	83	94	83	94
Somewhat Agree	0	1	10	3	14	11	23	28	0	1	17	6	17	6
Somewhat Disagree	0	0	0	0	5	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Completely Disagree	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Base	20	100	20	98	21	100	22	97	18	102	23	97	23	97

## 5. Conclusion

This Chapter has outlined the rationale that framed this research and the concepts that inform the analysis of the findings. The brief examination in this chapter of socio-cultural norms relating to concept of the family, in policy and in political narratives indicate an objectifying women's roles in motherhood and in their obligations to "family", in contrast to the non-existence of obligations of men and of fatherhood in the conceptualising of the "family".

The study highlights some factors that affect women's engagement in paid work and their inclusion (or not) in SNA defined activities. Reasons for women's inability to take on paid work were predominantly found to be directly related to their care responsibilities. Women were not in paid work not because they were unwilling to look for paid work but rather, because there were no viable support services to reduce or share the gendered care responsibilities "assigned" to them. The study also found an incremental increase in the care burden (Non-SNA activities) of women in relation to their civil status; married women spent more time on unpaid care work compared to women who were single, separated or widowed.

Responses to statements on social norms relating to women taking up paid work after marriage indicates that age and level of education are likely to be factors that would allow for women to counter negative attitudes regarding their agency.

Expectations of women engaging in paid work after marriage was higher among women who had achieved Advanced level or higher education, indicating that access to education can enable women to challenge patriarchal norms. Similarly, the younger the female respondent, the more likely that they would completely disagree that women should not take up paid work after marriage. Women and men both appear to accept that childcare should be equally shared by parents. However, these indicators of gendered notions on women's roles and social norms need to be further explored given that the study found that in effect women are constrained by marriage and unpaid care responsibilities when finding paid work.

The consolidation of the overall findings of the research<sup>32</sup> into a series of awareness-raising programmes on unpaid care work through mass media engagement is among the strategies that are being implemented. Discussion will continue with networks in partnership with the organisations that were part of this research project in their respective districts. Engagement with policy makers and planners to deepen the focus of social and public policy recognition of unpaid care work and valuing, redistributing and reducing work within the home is envisaged.

Given the current economic crisis the country is facing, there needs to be review and reflection on the impact of measures to curtail budgetary allocations for quality public services and social programmes. The repercussions of such decisions on households' access to services, as well as the intensification of financial constraints of households are already debilitating the social and economic standard of many families. This economic crisis adds to the urgency for the recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work as the burden of unpaid care is increasing within families and women are being pushed to maintain the wellbeing of household facing rapid depletion of resources.

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<sup>32</sup> Forthcoming

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# Valuing Unpaid Care Work in Six Districts in Sri Lanka: based on the WMC-SSA Time Use Survey<sup>1</sup>

Dilani Gunewardena<sup>2</sup> and Ashvin Perera<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Unpaid care work, defined by Budlender (2010, p.1) as “the housework and care of persons that occur in homes and communities of all societies on an unpaid basis,” is an invisible but enormously important feature of economic life that has been neglected by economists and policymakers. Unpaid care work, e.g., preparing meals, cleaning, laundry and the care of young children and the elderly is essential for the functioning and growth of the production sector of the economy; yet by being unvalued, it becomes invisible. Recognising unpaid care work and its allocation between men and women is important for understanding unequal bargaining power within households and its impact on the allocation of time and money by women (Folbre, 2006). The persistence of gender differences in time allocation perpetuates and exacerbates gender inequality and has important implications for macroeconomic policy (Floro, 2021).

Unpaid care work is increasingly becoming a focus of attention in Sri Lanka. In her maiden speech in parliament in September 2020, NPP MP Dr. Harini Amarasuriya drew attention to the important economic role played by those who engage in unpaid care (News Wire Editor, 2020, September 13). In an important step towards highlighting the value

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<sup>1</sup> Data for the time use analysis was gathered by the Women and Media Collective and the Social Scientists' Association and wage data was extracted from the Labour Force Survey 2019 with the permission of the Department of Census and Statistics.

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of unpaid work, the Department of Census and Statistics conducted a nationally representative Time Use Survey data in 2017, and the related report provides calculations of unpaid work in Sri Lanka. However, the report stops short of a valuation of unpaid work.<sup>4</sup>

Why value unpaid care work? Valuing care work is not necessarily undertaken from the perspective that the work should be paid, or that a monetary value could accurately represent the worth of this work to its recipients, families, and society. Rather, the purpose of valuing care work is to promote a more “accurate and comprehensive” valuation of the work that takes place in economies (UNDP 1995, p. 88) and to strengthen the argument that those who provide unpaid work to family or household members are entitled to a fair share and control over income generated by those members (Budlender, 2010). Valuing unpaid care work is also a means by which the opportunity cost of engagement in the System of National Accounts (SNA) sector of the economy could be measured. Policymakers and firms are anxious to increase Sri Lanka’s labour force participation; a recent study identified that opportunity costs, especially the cost of care, are likely to be a major factor hampering women’s labour force participation (Abeysinghe et al., 2022).

This article briefly summarizes the methodology to value unpaid care work, and then applies it to data collected in a unique in-depth quantitative survey of unpaid care work of 840 individuals in seven locations across six districts conducted by the Women and Media Collective and the Social Scientists’ Association in 2018-2020 (Henceforth referred to as WMC-TUS).

## **Valuing unpaid care work**

Valuing unpaid care work involves two main processes: (1) the measurement of unpaid care work through the careful collection of data on time spent by individuals in unpaid care, (which in itself involves defining what constitutes care work, and identifying different types of care work) and (2) imputing value to the measures of time use. The first process requires time use data and the second requires wage data at the appropriate disaggregated level. This note describes the data used in each process and the methodology followed in each instance and finally presents estimates of the value of care work.

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘triple R’ approach to women’s unpaid work was first articulated by Diane Elson, and is elucidated on in Elson (2017).

## Measuring unpaid care work: time use data

### *Definitions*

Unpaid work is often difficult to distinguish from other types of activity that are unpaid and early economists typically conflated it with “leisure” activities. Margaret Reid’s third-person principle provides a useful way of identifying an activity performed by an individual as work: it may be done by a third person without affecting the utility value returned to the individual (Beneria, Berik, & Floro, 2016, p. 198).

Care work is defined as including tasks that directly involve care processes done in the immediate service of others that develop their human capabilities; care activities involve face-to-face activities that “strengthen the physical health and safety, and the physical, cognitive or emotional skills of the care recipient” (England, Budig, & Folbre, 2002). It is sometimes differentiated from other work on the basis of motivation, and is assumed to be intrinsically motivated, done out of affection or a sense of responsibility for others, with no expectation of a pecuniary reward (Folbre, 1995). Elson (2000) notes that it is unpaid because it arises out of societal obligations, it is care because it relates to well-being, and it is work because it has time and energy costs.

Unpaid work can be categorized into three sub-categories, “unpaid household maintenance (housework), unpaid care of persons in one’s own household, and unpaid community service and help to other households” (Budlender, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

### *Data*

Time use data was obtained from 840 individuals (148 men and 692 women) in 800+ households in the Badulla, Batticaloa, Colombo, Gampaha (two locations), Kurunegala and Nuwara Eliya districts, using a diary method, where individuals were requested to note down approximate minutes spent in over 25 activities over 14 days. Of these activities, 13 activities were noted to be specifically unpaid care activities. Following Charmes (2015), these could be categorized as domestic work (cleaning, cooking, buying groceries for the household), care work (of children and elderly), voluntary work (care of other households, work for the community) and education (helping children with school work). We further aggregated them into three categories of (a) household maintenance and management, (b) care services and (c) voluntary community services (Budlender, 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> Table 5 presents a categorization of the activities for which information was gathered in the WMC-TUS.



## *Methods*

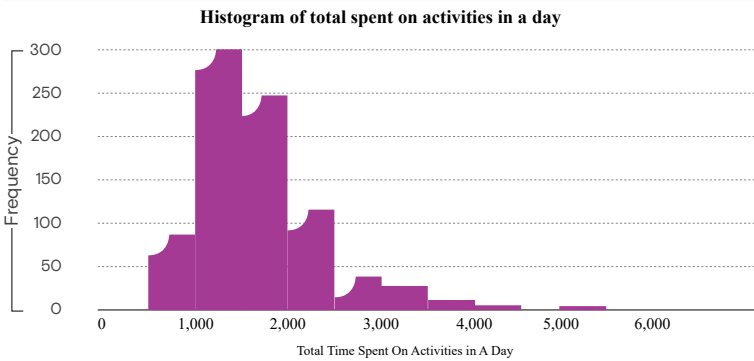
Typically, the valuation of care is presented as a percentage of GDP (Budlender, 2010; Suh et al, 2020; Suh 2021). As the WMC-TUS was conducted on a non-representative small sample, such a calculation is not possible. Instead, we calculate an average daily valuation of the time spent in unpaid care work, averaged across the sample population. We also present this measure by gender, district, and levels of education.

Time use analysis differentiates between mean actor time (calculations are only for those who participate in unpaid care work) and mean population time (calculations are calculated across the entire sample, irrespective of whether they participated in unpaid care work or not). In this analysis, the time spent in unpaid care work is that of mean population time, i.e., it is calculated as the population average for all individuals regardless of whether they participated in unpaid care work and the valuation is of such time. Thus, mean population time is the multiplicative of the proportion of persons who engaged in unpaid care work and the mean actor time of these persons. This measure is used as we present average daily valuations of unpaid and care work, rather than total valuations that are comparable to contributions to GDP. Intuitively, this measure gives us the valuation of the time spent by the average person in the population on unpaid care work, regardless of whether the person engages in this work or not.

A characteristic feature of unpaid work is that many activities are carried out simultaneously. In that case, how should they be valued? Budlender (2010) asks, “for example, if two activities are carried out simultaneously in a given 30-minute period, should each be allocated a period of 15 or 30 minutes?” We distinguish, as does Budlender (2010) between the 24-hour minute and the full minute. “For the 24-hour minute, the available time is divided between the simultaneous activities so that all activities in a given day add up to 24 hours. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for simple comparisons of the distribution of activities over a full day” (Budlender, 2010). “For the “full minute,” each activity is given its full duration. The advantage of this approach is that it is possible to see the full extent of time devoted to particular activities. This is particularly important in the case of an activity such as care, where the performance of the activity may limit the carer in terms of what other activities can be performed at the same time, and where.” (Budlender, 2010).

Budlender (2010) found that in Argentina, where simultaneous activities were captured in detail, the full minute approach gave an average of over 28 hours per day, while in South Korea and India, the difference in results between the two approaches was small. We followed Budlender (2010) in using the full minute approach, with the results presented in Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 1. We note, however, that this can result in an overestimate of time owing to not accounting for simultaneous activities (Charmes, 2019). Figure 1 and Table 1 confirm this, showing that both the median (26 hours) and mean (28 hours) time taken for all activities (excluding sleep) exceeds 24 hours.

**Figure 1:** HISTOGRAM OF TOTAL TIME SPENT ON ALL ACTIVITIES (EXCLUDING SLEEP) IN A DAY



Source: Calculations from WMC-TUS data

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of hours spent on all activities (excluding sleep) during the day

	Min.	Median	Mean	Max.	Std. Dev
Hours	5.21	25.97	28.05	103.67	12.02

**Table 2:** Mean daily population time (minutes) on care activities by gender, “full” minute

Description	Male	Female	All
<b>Housework (Maintenance and Management)</b>			
Cooking	38.72	94.85	84.96
Washing utensils/cleaning kitchen	19.73	44.67	40.28
Cleaning house/garden, repair work	45.60	45.56	45.57
Buying groceries for household	57.48	56.46	56.64
Washing clothes (own or of family members)	30.77	47.62	44.65
Total housework (maintenance and management)	192.31	289.16	272.10

Description	Male	Female	All
<b>Caregiving services</b>			
Taking care of elders (voluntary)	27.50	64.20	57.73
Taking care of children (own)	130.28	218.16	202.68
Taking care of children (family members)	38.85	67.73	62.64
Medical care (for self or family member)	46.10	63.96	60.82
Helping the children with their school work	25.20	37.91	35.67
Total caregiving services	267.94	451.97	419.54
<b>Voluntary services</b>			
Taking care of children of other households (voluntary)	13.33	22.74	21.08
Helping with chores of other households	33.40	29.95	30.56
Participating in village level organisations	31.83	32.34	32.25
Total voluntary services	78.55	85.03	83.89
Total housework and caregiving services	460.25	741.13	691.64
Total housework, caregiving services and voluntary services	538.80	826.16	775.53

Source: Calculations are from WMC-TUS data.

<sup>6</sup> Note that in other studies, the 24-hour minute is calculated by dividing time spent in simultaneous activities by the number of activities undertaken simultaneously. Such information may be extracted in future from WMC-TUS; should it become available, we will calculate 24-hour-minute measures of time use in future work.

Table 2 indicates that the total (population) time spent on average per day on all unpaid housework and care and voluntary activities is 8.98 hours for men, and 13.77 hours for women, which is considerably higher than the estimates obtained from the National Time Use Survey (NTUS) conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics – 1.6 hours for men and 5.7 hours for women (DCS, 2020). Even eliminating voluntary work, the measure is 7.67 hours for men and 12.35 hours for women. This suggests that the presence of simultaneous activities has led to an overestimation of care and housework activities. We therefore make some assumptions to derive an approximation of the 24-hour minute. Taking the mean measure of 28 hours and adding the national average of sleep (8 hours, 6 minutes) obtained from the National Time Use Survey 2017, we arrive at a “full” day of 36.15 hours. We convert all full minutes into 24-hour minutes by multiplying by 24/36, i.e., 0.664.<sup>6</sup> The resultant 24-hour minute estimates of time use are given in Table 3.

The total “24-hour minute” time spent in all unpaid work, as calculated in this manner, results in an estimate of an average of 8.58 hours overall, 5.96 hours on average for men and 9.14 hours on average for women. Eliminating voluntary unpaid work results in an estimate of 7.65 hours overall, 5.09 on average for men, and 8.2 on average for women. While still higher than the estimates obtained from the National Time Use Survey 2017, for both men and women, and also higher than estimates in comparable studies done in Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America, they do come close to several estimates for Latin America (Charmes, 2015). UN Women (2021, Table 4) report that in Mexico (in 2014), women spent 140 minutes and men spent 44 minutes in the direct care of household children; the former is comparable to the estimates presented in Table 3. However, estimates of direct care of household and non-household adults in Mexico at 23 and 14 minutes for women and men respectively (UN Women, 2021, Table 4), were somewhat lower than the estimates in Table 3 for taking care of elders. The WMC-TUS does not distinguish between direct and indirect care, and it is likely that some of the estimates in Table 3 refer to indirect care. This component of care is estimated as 268 minutes for women and 76 minutes for men in Mexico in 2014. Comparing disaggregated estimates with the results for Bhutan (Suh et al., 2020, Figure 6) indicates a similarity in estimates, especially for women, in some aspects of housework: for cooking (97 minutes for Bhutanese women, 28 for Bhutanese men) for dishwashing (17 minutes for women, 3 for men), cleaning and upkeep (28 for women, 14 for men) and for laundry, (21 minutes for women, 3 for men). However, the overall estimate for household maintenance and management in Bhutan was only 95 minutes for women and 61 minutes for men (Suh et al., 2020, Figure 6), compared with the estimates for Sri Lanka in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Mean daily population time (minutes) on care activities by gender, “24-hour” minute

Description	Male	Female	All
<b>Housework (Maintenance and Management)</b>			
Cooking	25.70	62.96	56.40
Washing utensils/ cleaning kitchen	13.10	29.65	26.74
Cleaning house/ garden, repair work	30.27	30.24	30.25
Buying groceries for household	38.16	37.48	37.60
Washing clothes (own or of family members)	20.43	31.61	29.64
Total housework (maintenance and management)	127.66	191.95	180.63

Description	Male	Female	All
<b>Caregiving services</b>			
Taking care of elders (voluntary)	18.26	42.62	38.32
Taking care of children (own)	86.48	144.82	134.55
Taking care of children (family members)	25.79	44.96	41.58
Medical care (for self or family member)	30.60	42.46	40.37
Helping the children with their school work	16.73	25.17	23.68
Total caregiving services	177.87	300.03	278.50
<b>Voluntary services</b>			
Taking care of children of other households (voluntary)	8.85	15.10	13.99
Helping with chores of other households	22.17	19.88	20.29
Participating in village-level organisations	21.13	21.47	21.41
Total voluntary services	52.14	56.45	55.69
Total housework and caregiving services	305.53	491.98	459.13
Total housework, caregiving services and voluntary services	357.67	548.43	514.82

Source: Calculations from WMC-TUS data, adjusted as indicated in the text.

**Table 4:** Mean daily population time (minutes) on unpaid work by gender, “24-hour” minute

Description	Male	Female	All
Sri Lanka	357.67	548.43	514.82
Badulla	374.30	763.90	702.22
Batticaloa	291.63	341.69	332.93
Colombo	382.08	712.56	655.20
Gampaha 1 (Households with migrant returnees)	393.78	580.58	546.33
Gampaha 2 (Free Trade Zone workers)	527.70	790.86	747.00
Nuwara Eliya	297.13	443.42	417.82
Kurunegala	528.32	664.50	637.26

Description	Male	Female	All
Up to Grade 5	460.11	471.19	470.11
Up to Grade 8	406.62	453.48	447.28
Up to O Level	353.67	565.54	530.32
Up to A Level	357.43	600.80	553.70
Graduate	272.96	450.20	413.53
Vocational	416.11	423.30	420.83
Professional	136.06	753.82	650.86
Postgraduate	675.60	485.32	509.11

Source: Calculations from WMC-TUS data, adjusted as indicated in the text. Figures in italics are based on very small sample sizes and cannot be used to draw any inference.

As Table 4 and Figure 2 indicate, there is considerable variation by district, as well as by educational level, of both the amount of time spent on unpaid work by men and women, as well as of the gender ratio of time spent on unpaid work. Women in Badulla, Colombo, and Kurunegala spent the most time in unpaid work, but women in Badulla and Colombo spent about twice as much time as men did, while in Kurunegala, women spent only about 25 per cent more time than men. Men and women in lower educational categories spent about the same time in unpaid work, while the gender discrepancy in time use was largest in the professional category.<sup>7</sup> Women with secondary education and graduates spent about 60-68 per cent more time in unpaid work than

<sup>7</sup> However, the sample size for this category was very small, at 12 individuals, so that inference cannot be drawn.

men in those same educational categories, but men with postgraduate education engaged in more unpaid work than their female counterparts.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2: MEAN DAILY POPULATION TIME (MINUTES) ON UNPAID WORK BY GENDER, “24-HOUR” MINUTE**



Source: Calculations from WMC-TUS data, adjusted as indicated in the text.

### *Valuing unpaid care work: Imputing value to measures of care work*

Unpaid care work can be valued either in terms of the input (mainly labour) or the output (the value of the service that is produced). With an input-based method, it can be valued at the income that is foregone to undertake the work (opportunity cost method), or at the cost incurred to replace the work (replacement method). The opportunity cost method has been criticized because the value of the service being produced will vary vastly depending on who is producing it. The replacement cost method assumes that household members and their replacements are equally productive. The more widely applied of these methods is the replacement method.<sup>9</sup> In using a replacement method, one could apply a generalist wage, for example, the wage of a housekeeper, or that of a specialist, depending on the tasks, e.g., cook, plumber, etc., or the minimum wage. Budlender (2010), Suh (2020) and UNECE (2017) discuss the pros and cons of each method. In this study, we follow the methodology implemented by Suh et al. (2020) and Suh (2021) and use an input-based, replacement cost methodology, using both the generalist and specialist wage approaches. The cartoon (Figure 3) illustrates the main thrust of the specialist wage approach.

<sup>9</sup> It is also the method recommended by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2017).

**Figure 3:**

**Specialist replacements  
for unpaid work**



**Source:**

Dan Reynolds (2013),  
artizans.com. [https://  
www.artizans.com/image/  
REY2144/children-hire-  
fill-ins-for-mother-on-  
mothers-day-color/](https://www.artizans.com/image/REY2144/children-hire-fill-ins-for-mother-on-mothers-day-color/)

***Source of wages***

Sri Lanka obtains wage and employment data through quarterly labour force surveys. Occupational information is obtained from individuals and coded using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO 08). We use all four quarters of the 2019 Labour Force Survey to compute both generalist and specialist wages.

***Average wage***

The wages calculated in this document are all median wages. Earnings distributions tend to be clustered at the lower end of the distribution. This leads to a skewed representation of average values when using mean wages which are strongly influenced by extreme values in the right tail, while the use of the median wage avoids this problem. Median wages are therefore typically used in these calculations, for example, in studies of Nicaragua, Tanzania, South Africa and Argentina (Budlender, 2010) and South Korea (Suh, 2021) and we follow this practice.



### ***Wages of employees only or earnings of self-employed as well?***

Budlender (2010) makes the point that in many developing countries the bulk of the population are self-employed (Budlender, 2010); yet we decided to limit our wage calculations to those of employees. The difficulty with including self-employment earnings is that it also includes returns to other factors (e.g., profits). It can also be argued that from a replacement cost point of view, it is the value of wages of an employee that could be hired that is applicable. We therefore use only the wages of employees and not self-employment earnings in this calculation. We also limit the calculation of wages to those who are employees in their stated main occupation, in order to obtain a more specific estimation of the occupational wage.

### ***Gender-pooled vs. gender-disaggregated wages***

Should care work be valued at the wage rate most relevant to the individual, i.e., should women's time be valued at a female wage rate and men's time be valued at a male wage rate? Suh et al. (2020) and Budlender (2010) use an average wage determined by pooling male and female wages, and Budlender (2010) argues that this is because the household is concerned with having the work performed rather than with the gender of the performer. Given that gender-specific wages incorporate gender bias inherent in market wages, we consider matching wages with an individual's sex to be problematic. Moreover, as (Budlender, 2010) notes, the pooled wage rate is also biased downward as there is a high female concentration in care. We value care work at the pooled wage rate. We also note that because occupations are highly gendered, in some occupations, the sample size for one or the other sex (usually male, because women predominate in paid care work as well) is too small to be reliable.

### ***National vs. geographically disaggregated wages***

Should care work be valued at the locally applicable wage rate or at national wage rates? Typically, the literature uses a national wage (Suh, 2021). Using a locally relevant wage reflects both demand and cost-of-living differences associated with different regions, however, sample size limitations prevent us from doing so. We use a national wage rate and note that this is consistent with previous studies (Budlender, 2010; Suh et al., 2020; Suh, 2021).

## ***Generalist wage***

Suh (2021) uses the median wage of (a) domestic helpers and housekeepers as a lower bound calculation and the median wage of (b) primary school teachers as an upper bound. We find only one housekeeper in the LFS2019 data set, and therefore use only the category of domestic cleaners and helpers. In the upper bound category, we use early childhood educators (comparable with elementary school teachers) as an additional category to primary school teachers (Table 5).

<b>Table 5: Occupations used to calculate generalist wages</b>		
<b>Generalist Wage Method</b>	<b>Occupation Used</b>	<b>Occupation Code</b>
Lower Bound: Domestic and House Keeping <sup>9</sup>	Domestic Cleaners and Helpers	9,111
Upper Bound: Specialist Teaching Jobs	Primary School Teachers	2,341
	Early Childhood Educators	2,342

Note 1: There is only one value for the category of domestic housekeeper in the LFS2019, so we only use the category of domestic cleaner/helper for the lower bound estimate of the generalist wage.

Table 6 provides estimates of these wages derived from the 2019 Labour Force Survey. Estimates are nationally representative averages, computed by weighting sample data with the expansion factors provided in the LFS data file.

<b>Table 6: Generalist wages for Sri Lanka (daily wage rate), national estimates.</b>				
	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
Lower Bound – domestic cleaners	824.18	600.00	615.38	38,216
Upper Bound – primary school teachers	1,951.65	2,051.28	2,030.77	36,268
Upper Bound – early childhood educators	1819.78	923.08	923.08	7,114

Source: Research team calculations using unit data from LFS 2019

National lower bound wages are about 20 per cent higher than the daily minimum wage of Rs. 500.<sup>10</sup> Upper bound wages using primary teachers' wages are more than three times the magnitude of lower bound wages, while early childhood educators' wages are only about 1.67 times the lower bound estimate. Estimates of wages by district and sector were attempted, but as the level of disaggregation increases, the reliability of the estimates falls owing to the small sample size for each cell. We therefore chose to use only national-level wages to estimate the value of unpaid care work.

### *Specialist wages*

To construct specialist wages, unpaid care work activities are selected from the International Classification of Activities for Time-Use Statistics (ICATUS) list of activities that fall under the list of non-SNA activities. These activities are then matched to similar specialist jobs in the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO 08) following the third-party principle. We largely follow Suh (2020) in matching activities to ISCO codes, given the somewhat similar cultural and labour market contexts between Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Where activities are not found in Suh (2020) we use an appropriate third-party specialist or the average wage of a group of third-party specialist employment (see Table 7). The purpose of the specialist wage estimation is to impute specialist wages to the specific task being considered. With this aim in mind, we avoid imputing a generalist wage, except where sample sizes for specialist wages in the LFS2019 are too small to be reliable. LFS2019 had no observations for the occupations of chef (3434) and cooks (5120) and only three observations for kitchen assistants (9412), so we chose instead to use the remaining occupation of fast-food preparers within the larger category of food preparation assistants. We felt this was justified as fast-food preparers were included under cooks in ISCO-88. For the activity of washing utensils and cleaning the kitchen, we followed Suh (2020) and used the category of waiters. LFS2019 had only one observation for housekeepers (5152) and five observations for launderers and pressers (9121) which are the occupations used by Suh (2020) for cleaning and upkeep and laundry, respectively. Suh's (2020) data does not include a category "helping with chores of other households". We use domestic cleaners as the closest available, though generalist, alternative in all these cases. We use office helpers and cleaners (9112) instead of domestic cleaners (9111) used by Suh (2020) for buying groceries

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<sup>10</sup> Section 03 of the Minimum Wage of Employees Act No. 03 of 2016 established a monthly minimum wage of Rs. 10,000 and a daily minimum wage of Rs. 400. The National Minimum Wage of Workers Act (Amendment)

for the family and for volunteering in village-level organisations. The latter is on the basis that such work often involves shramadana-type activities. We use health care assistants (5321) instead of nurses (2221) for taking care of elders, as this would be the closest substitute in the Sri Lankan context. Medical care provision is not a category included in Suh (2020). We use nursing professionals as the most appropriate specialist replacement in this context. Childcare workers are the most commonly used specialist replacement for childcare activities (Suh, 2020) and we use this category (5311).

**Table 7:** Unpaid Housework and Caregiving Activities, and Corresponding Occupations

Description	Occupation	ISCO-08 Code	Sample LFS2019
<b>Housework (Maintenance and Management)</b>			
Cooking	Fast food preparers	9411	35
Washing utensils/cleaning kitchen	Waiters	5131	52
Cleaning house/garden, repair work	Domestic cleaners	9111	255
Buying groceries for household	Office helpers	9112	582
Washing clothes (own or of family members)	Domestic cleaners	9121	255
<b>Caregiving services</b>			
Taking care of elders (voluntary)	Health care assistants	5321	100
Taking care of children (own)	Childcare workers	5311	48
Taking care of children (family members)	Childcare workers	5311	48
Medical care (for self or family member)	Nursing professionals	2221	159
Helping the children with their school work	Primary School Teachers	2341	314

Description	Occupation	ISCO-08 Code	Sample LFS2019
<b>Voluntary services</b>			
Taking care of children of other households (voluntary)	Childcare workers/early childhood educators	5311	48
Helping with chores of other households	Domestic cleaners	9111	255
Participating in village-level organisations	Office helpers	9112	582

Source: Description/categorization of activities is from WMC-TUS Survey 2019 Time Use Diary. ISCO-08 codes are from ILO [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_172572.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_172572.pdf) .

**Table 8:** Specialist wages for Sri Lanka (daily wage rate), national estimates.

	Male	Female	All	Sample size
Fast food preparers	975.82	600.00	975.82	17,17
Waiters	1,000.00	800.00	1,000.00	36,13
Office helpers	1,054.95	820.51	1,054.95	374,203
Health care assistants	1,257.86	1,230.77	1,257.86	31,69
Childcare workers	570.00	553.85	570.00	3,37
Nursing professionals	1,900	1,846.15	1,900.00	21,137

Source: Research team calculations using unit data from LFS 2019

### ***Imputed value of care work in Sri Lanka***

We compute the monetary value of unpaid care work, adapting the following procedure in Suh (2021) given below. We do not use sampling weights, as the WMC-TUS is not a nationally representative sample. We could, but do not, compute the total annual monetary value of unpaid care work for the sample of respondents. Rather, we compute the daily average monetary value of unpaid care work for the average person in the sample.

$$V = 1/N \sum_{i=1}^N \sum_{j=1}^M T_{ij} W_j$$

V = daily average monetary value of unpaid care work

N = Sample size

M = Number of unpaid care work activities

T = Number of hours spent on unpaid care work from the group of activities j per 24-hour period

W = Hourly wage of the specialized occupations in group j and hourly wage of the generalist (domestic workers and professionals in education) for valuation using a generalist wage.

The value of total care work done on an average day by any person in the sample (population) when valued at generalist and specialist wages is given in Table 9 below. Differences between the value of unpaid work done by men and women arise from differences in their average time use. The daily value of unpaid work done by the average person when valued at a generalist wage ranges from a lower bound of Rs. 660 per day to an upper bound of Rs. 2,178 per day. Valued at an alternative upper bound (early childhood educator instead of primary school teacher) or a specialist wage, yield remarkably similar values of Rs. 990 or 989 per day. The value of unpaid work performed by the average woman is higher in all cases, ranging from Rs.703 per day to Rs. 2,320 per day.

As the survey was not nationally representative, we do not compute shares of GDP. We could however compare these computed daily values of unpaid care work to other relevant wages and costs. We see that even using the lowest bound estimation, the daily value of unpaid work undertaken by the average person is 1.3 times the value of the national minimum wage. In Badulla, a tea-growing area, the daily value of females' unpaid work estimated at the lowest generalist wage is Rs. 979.36. This is 1.4 times the daily wage of estate workers, which was increased to Rs. 700 following strike action in 2019. In the sample of free trade zone workers in Gampaha, the economic valuation of daily unpaid work among women was Rs. 672, while the national "minimum" wage of apparel workers was approximately Rs. 727.<sup>11</sup> These two examples are from areas where women are typically in the labour force and suggest that in addition to earning an income, they also engage in unpaid work that is close to or greater than the value of their daily wage.

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<sup>11</sup> Rs. 16,000 monthly wage (Dabindu Collective, 2022, Jan 24) divided by 22 working days.

**Table 9:****Value of average daily care work based on mean population time, national, district and educational group, in Rupees.**

	Generalist wage					
	Lower bound – Domestic cleaner			Upper bound – Primary teacher		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Sri Lanka	458.55	703.10	660.02	1,513.22	2,320.24	2,178.09
Badulla	479.86	979.36	900.27	1,583.56	3,231.90	2,970.92
Batticaloa	373.88	438.06	426.83	1,233.82	1,445.63	1,408.56
Colombo	489.84	913.53	840.00	1,616.48	3,014.67	2,772.01
Gampaha1	334.47	493.61	465.53	1,103.75	1,628.94	1,536.26
Gampaha2	449.36	672.34	636.59	1,482.89	2,218.73	2,100.77
Nuwara Eliya	380.93	568.48	535.66	1,257.07	1,876.01	1,767.69
Kurunegala	677.32	851.91	816.99	2,235.18	2,811.33	2,696.10
Up to Grade 5	888.59	910.00	907.91	2,932.38	3,003.04	2,996.14
Up to Grade 8	785.30	875.80	863.83	2,591.53	2,890.17	2,850.65
Up to O Level	683.03	1,092.22	1,024.20	2,254.03	3,604.36	3,379.87
Up to A Level	690.21	1,160.32	1,069.34	2,277.98	3,829.07	3,528.86
Graduate	527.16	869.46	798.64	1,739.64	2,869.24	2,635.53
Vocational	803.63	817.52	812.75	2,652.01	2,697.83	2,682.08
Professional	262.77	1,455.84	1,257.00	867.16	4,804.31	4,148.12
Postgraduate	1,304.77	937.29	983.23	4,305.77	3,093.09	3,244.67

Source: Research team calculations using unit data from WMC-TUS. Gampaha1 is a sample of households in the Gampaha district with migrant returnees, and Gampaha2 is a sample of Free Trade Zone workers.



Upper bound – EC educator			Specialist wage			
Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All	
687.83	1,054.66	990.04	686.66	1,053.65	989.02	Sri Lanka
719.80	1,469.05	1,350.42	798.20	1,442.06	1,340.11	Badulla
560.83	657.10	640.26	554.16	712.28	684.61	Batticaloa
734.76	1,370.31	1,260.01	776.41	1,345.02	1,246.33	Colombo
501.70	740.43	698.30	543.53	779.80	738.33	Gampaha1
674.05	1,008.51	954.90	655.88	987.51	935.60	Gampaha2
571.40	852.73	803.50	593.89	894.05	841.52	Nuwara Eliya
1,016.00	1,277.88	1,225.50	874.10	1,208.72	1,141.79	Kurunegala
1,332.90	1,365.02	1,361.89	1,379.45	1,461.31	1,453.32	Up to Grade 5
1,177.97	1,313.72	1,295.75	1,077.00	1,328.71	1,295.40	Up to Grade 8
1,024.56	1,638.35	1,536.31	1,045.73	1,631.23	1,533.89	Up to O Level
1,035.45	1,740.49	1,604.03	1,015.43	1,725.88	1,588.37	Up to A Level
790.75	1,304.21	1,197.97	860.31	1,275.49	1,189.59	Graduate
1,205.46	1,226.29	1,219.13	1,087.60	1,233.80	1,183.54	Vocational
394.16	2,183.78	1,885.51	509.03	2,165.25	1,889.21	Professional
1,957.17	1,405.95	1,474.86	1,932.43	1,380.71	1,449.67	Postgraduate

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# **Only the Mother will do: Analysis of State Responses to Women’s Migration Aspirations**

**Chandima Arambepola**

For decades, Sri Lankan women have migrated overseas to assume work as domestic workers. At the peak, women constituted over 75 per cent of all migrant workers; over 75 per cent of the women migrated as domestic workers (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2020). That this work largely constitutes cheap labour and work as “servants” to wealthy households of the oil-rich West Asian states has increasingly become a point of contention for the media, the public, and to a large extent, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). With its stated commitment to promoting “skilled” labour migration, the GoSL has sought to remove the country’s reliance on female migrant workers for foreign remittances. But underlying this policy stance is a more worrying sentiment, steeped in cultural ideologies of a woman’s place in society as a mother and primary caregiver to the family.

The nature of the work – looking after the household chores and childcare of foreign families while living in the employer’s household – raises valid questions about access to healthcare, decent work and living conditions for these migrant women (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018a) which require direct interventions on the part of the state. However, as this paper argues, instead of devising measures to support and ensure that migrant domestic workers have the protection they require to carry out their tasks while working overseas, successive governments have focused on limiting the space these women have to seek work as foreign domestic workers and thereby earn a reasonable, sustainable income as a paid caregiver.

Using the example of the imposition of mobility restrictions on aspiring migrant workers in Sri Lanka, this paper argues that the GoSL’s attempts to stop women from seeking work overseas mirror the cultural and societal expectations of placing women as the primary caregiver of the family – a role that cannot be substituted by anyone else in her

absence. In doing so, the GoSL has not only curbed a woman's ability to make choices about the type of employment she wishes to engage in and also her choice to migrate but has also resulted in undermining its own policy commitments regarding the much-vaunted ideals of "female empowerment" and in practice, has set a dangerous precedent to limit women's choices.

The contents of the paper are structured thus. It first examines the global literature on transnational mothering and its changing dynamics, especially in light of evidence stemming from migrant women of the Global South who provide such paid care work, and thereafter, focuses on the conditions that led to the imposition of the mobility restriction. Using the available data on the Family Background Report (FBR) – in the form of policy documents and successive government circulars – and interviews conducted over several years with government officials in the course of multiple rounds of data collection for research projects, the remainder of the paper examines how the continued imposition of mobility restrictions display the inherent traditional framing of women as caregivers and thus, bound to the family unit. Borrowing from the literature, the paper reflects on how women's attempts to redefine their caregiver role are rejected by the state and its agents but also how such restrictions then increase women's vulnerabilities to be exploited as they continue to resist these narrow framings and migrate regardless.

## **Background**

Arlie Hochschild's work examining the transnational care chains brought attention to the globalized nature of care arrangements and their feminization. Hochschild's argument brought attention to the fact that women in the global North could access work by sub-contracting their care responsibilities to migrant women tapped from poorer economies, thus creating a chain of care that linked women across the globe. Hochschild's work also focused on how Third World women could only take up these positions as care workers and/or domestic workers by paying a female in their community in return, to look after her own children. Hence, rather than "liberating" women from household chores, the care chains ensure that household and care work remain within the ambit of women's responsibilities and "passes on" to a new generation. More recently, she echoed growing calls to recognise unpaid care work, but also highlighted the challenges in giving care work its due place in society:

The low value placed on caring work is not due to the absence of a need for it, or to the simplicity or ease of the work, but to the cultural politics underlying this global exchange. The declining value of childcare anywhere in the world can be compared with the declining value of basic food crops, relative to manufactured goods on the international market... Just as the market price of primary produce keeps the Third World low in the community of nations, so the low market value of care keeps the status of the women who do it – and, by association, all women – low. (Hochschild, 2016, p. 261)

This “commodification of care” is further exacerbated by the withdrawal of the welfare state from extending care support (Wilding and Baldassaer, 2018). This has left the care sector highly informalised and largely unregulated, resulting in women seeking cheap labour; the women who assume these jobs consequently work in a highly informalised sector (Lutz, 2018), lacking, at times, basic protections. The lack or withdrawal of support from the state tacitly confirms that providing care remains within women’s reproductive labour and therefore, must be addressed privately. As some would argue, the welfare states of the global North rely on migrant women, regardless of their migration status, to respond to this care deficit (Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck, 2012).

Even though Hochschild’s argument does not adequately explain South-South migration, where the demand for cheap labour was not necessarily conditional to women’s access to the labour force, but rather by the wealth of the oil-producing nations, the globalized nature of the care chains, and the inter-connectedness of these individuals linked across continents, gave rise to the idea of transnational families and its closer examination via a transnational lens. Key to these discussions has been the separation of paid and unpaid care work especially because domestic workers’ jobs entail paid care work – remuneration they do not otherwise receive for looking after their own children. It is, therefore, inevitable that the question of “mothering” from a distance is linked to this idea of transnational families.

The concept of transnational families, displaced across different time zones and geographical spaces, has raised some pertinent questions regarding how migrant women in particular, manage their transnational lives. Key among these concerns is who cares for her own children in her absence. Parnas’ work in relation to female migrant workers from

the Philippines has been fundamental in critically analysing how the transnational family is in a state of tension in the absence of the mother. Parnass's research points to the "gender transformation" in Philippine society where women have, quite emphatically, sought work overseas as a means to support their families financially and thereby displaced their role within the family as the primary caregiver (Parnass, 2010, p. 1826). But such migration choices have come at a high cost for the women as Philippine society "...believes that (1) mothers are the best nurturers of their children and (2) fathers left behind are 'naturally' incapable caregivers of the family" (2010, p.1833). Hence, the reliance on – as Hochschild argued – female kin to assume these responsibilities of care.

Similar to Parnass, research conducted in different destination countries with migrant women has sought to better understand the notion of "mothering" from a distance. Madziva and Zontini's (2012) analysis of Zimbabwean women asylum seekers' experiences in the United Kingdom, makes a very clear distinction: that transnational mothering is not only about providing emotional care but also being able to provide material care in the form of financial support. The latter aim, however, is difficult to realise for these women due to structural level impediments in the form of the UK's policies governing asylum. This research is among several similar studies to clearly trace/indicate how institutional frameworks shape the ability of women to perform mothering from a distance. A similar sentiment is expressed by Frezonsa-Font (2009) who found Filipino women adopting multiple strategies to manage their transnational families from a distance. The author also found that undocumented women struggled the most, given their inability to return home to visit their families during emergencies and to exercise and perform care at regular intervals. A key focus in these studies, therefore, is on the strategies used by women to perform long-distance mothering. Resisting attempts by the media to frame women as "bad" mothers (Juozeliuniene and Budginaite, 2018), women increasingly adopt technology in particular, as a means to manage their households from a distance (Peng and Wong, 2013).

The strategies adopted also vary, depending on the particular context and the physical distance to the family. For instance, Senegalese women working in France were found to adopt either distance mothering or "circular mothering" – a process where the migrant woman or the child would travel back and forth. Yet again, the institutional structures were found to determine the choices of the women, especially given their access to work and residence status in the destination country (Vives and Vazquez Silva, 2017). Thus, transnational mothering remains a dynamic

process enabled by technological advancements and at times, requires a re-evaluation and adaptation on the part of the woman in response to the state responses that restrict access to the left-behind family. As some of these authors argue and Parennas (2010) clearly states, migrant women have thus re-defined what it is to provide care in a transnational space, especially by re-evaluating mothering as a role that is not determined solely on being physically present with their children.

In short, by migrating overseas for work but continuing to find means to maintain relations and manage their children's care responsibilities from afar, women migrant workers are displacing traditional ideologies around mothering. Transnational care presupposes that to provide care, an individual is not required to be physically present (Wilding and Baldassar, 2018). While providing proximate care is not possible, migrant women are devising means of being involved. They are also reconfiguring the mothering role to include both reproductive and productive labour thereby, blurring the two categories. But in trying to re-frame the role of motherhood, what migrant women encounter and have to confront is the cultural norms and values that dictate "substitute" mothers cannot replace an absent, long-distance mother.

"Good" motherhood for transnational mothers involves being able to provide for their children and to give them the opportunity to have a better life. The tensions that arise from having to leave their children in order to do so become ingrained in the everyday life of the mothers away. (Millman, 2013, p. 79).

Hence, while mothering from a distance is possible and women are adapting themselves to these changes, they also experience tensions as these cultural norms and beliefs are embedded into their lives as well.

In Sri Lanka, while women's migratory trajectories have received sustained attention over the years, the left-behind families have received more sustained attention in the recent past, leading to questions being raised regarding the well-being of the left-behind children. Gamburd's ethnographic study (2000) suggests that gender transformation within the family has indeed taken place with the men forced to assume some caregiver responsibilities but that a significant role is played by female kith and kin to support such children.

In contrast to the social transformation taking place within the family unit, more recent studies have sought to question the stability of the family unit as a result of the mother's absence. Several studies



have focused on children’s well-being, their ability to “cope” in the absence of the mother in particular (Athauda et al., 2000; Senaratna, & Visanka, 2012; Siriwardhana et al., 2015), while others have considered the transnational mothering “capabilities” of the migrant women (Handapangoda, 2014; Pinnawala, 2009; Ukwatta, 2010). These studies are grounded in the “logic” that the nuclear family in the absence of the mother is in distress – the children lack protection, their well-being deteriorates in the absence of the mother, and the alcoholic husband is incapable of looking after the well-being of the children. Therefore, the “cost” of migration is deemed to be too high as the women return to homes that are dysfunctional, disintegrating, and financially poor. More recent studies, however, have shifted their focus somewhat to examine the structural elements shaping migration decisions and trajectories (ILO, 2020; Weeraratne, 2016, 2018 and 2020; Withers, 2019). Key among these major changes has been the imposition of the Family Background Report regulation.

Parennas’ (2010) core argument resonates in Sri Lanka as well – that migrant women’s attempts to “redefine mothering” is rejected by the Philippine society, as the mother is viewed as the only person who can act as the primary caregiver of the children. But perhaps where the two countries differ is the way in which the state has responded to this social “dilemma.” While the Philippines government has not sought to stop women from migrating as domestic workers, the GoSL’s response via mobility restrictions has had far-reaching effects on women and their households.

## **Mobility restriction in the form of the Family Background Report**

Imposing restrictions on women’s mobility and access to work overseas is not uncommon in Southeast and South Asia. India has a history of trialling such bans, as well as Nepal, the Philippines (with multiple countries) and Indonesia (Shivakoti et al., 2021). To date, one of the most emphatic and long-standing “bans” imposed on migrant women has been the Family Background Report regulation introduced by the GoSL in 2013. Examining the immediate cause that led to the ban points to the reactionary responses that the GoSL adopts to crises that affect migrant workers (Collyer et al., 2009). In this instance, the execution of Rizana Nafeek – an underaged, young female domestic worker accused of killing the baby in her care in Saudi Arabia, spurred anger in Sri Lanka, partly due to the failure of the GoSL to successfully negotiate and stay her execution (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2013).

Introduced a few months after her death, the FBR is generally viewed as a measure to curb women's migration and to ease the public fury rather than as any tangible, constructive means of addressing the issues that led to Rizana's death. The arbitrary introduction of a near blanket ban on women who wished to migrate was received with protests, both locally and internationally (Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation Sri Lanka. 2017, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2014). But over the years, its transformation indicates an even more troubling concern as the GoSL has sought to tighten the reigns around female migration rather than seek ways to ensure that migrant workers' rights are protected and state protection is assured while working overseas.

The initial regulation was issued as a Chairman's Circular (No 13/2013), to all employment agencies directing them to carry out checks on the "family background" of all aspiring female domestic workers as they are "leaving the country without informing the actual state of affairs at home in Sri Lanka." This, in turn, may force women to return prematurely, rendering a high cost to the GoSL. Hence, the circular stipulates the cost of such premature returns by female domestic workers must be borne by the recruitment agent. The message being conveyed was clear: women who seek to migrate as domestic workers originate from poor families which by nature, are "troubled" and require closer scrutiny. Hence, the need for recruitment agents to investigate the suitability of the aspirant migrant woman, especially anyone with children, to migrate overseas as a domestic worker. By highlighting the financial repercussions to the recruitment agent, the responsibility of monitoring the lives of the women is passed on to a third party, the recruitment agent. The underlying contradiction of the government's position is difficult to ignore: the women are suitable enough to migrate as domestic workers to assume the care for the children and households of a foreign employer but may not be a "good" mother who had performed her role adequately in relation to her own family and children.

This directive would soon be followed by a Ministerial circular issued by the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare in December 2013, detailing the process to be adopted in providing clearance for any aspiring migrant woman to migrate. Since then, there have been multiple iterations of the FBR regulation but one particular feature has remained intact. Women with children under the age of five years are disallowed from migrating for work.

Since 2013, the FBR regulation has become deeply embedded in the institutional framework. This entailed shifting the regularization of women's migration from the recruitment agencies to the newly

appointed Migration Development Officers (MDOs) who would in turn, carry out investigations to ascertain the presence of children under the age of five years or children with disabilities and assess the woman's suitability to leave the family behind.

Several troubling elements introduced via multiple revisions had to be removed following criticism. These included seeking the permission of the husband to migrate, even where the spouse had abandoned the family or was divorced; disallowing women with a disabled child from migrating altogether, placing the power to determine the suitability of the woman to migrate in the hands of the local Grama Niladhari<sup>1</sup> and unmarried adult women requiring the permission of their parents to migrate.

Since the initial "hiccups," the FBR regulation is now part of a considerably exhaustive state apparatus, stemming from the MDO and the recruitment agent/sub-agent to a committee of Development Officers who assess the suitability of the woman to migrate at the Divisional Secretariat level to an appeals committee set up at the national Ministerial level (ILO, 2018b). These hurdles that have been set up thus, make up a complex structure that women are compelled to encounter. In November 2020, the administering of the regulation was eased as two forms were introduced – one for women with children and the other, for those without. This change follows a failed attempt to lift the FBR regulation as the impact on female labour migration, even for skilled categories, had been affected by the imposition (Weeraratne, 2021).

A more recent decision with regard to the FBR regulation suggests the limits to the state's concern for the well-being of migrant women and their families. In June 2022, the government partially lifted the FBR regulation by allowing women with children over two years to migrate (Arambepola, 2022). While evidence gathered over the years had pointed to the drawbacks of this policy position, the government's pivot can only be understood when foregrounded in Sri Lanka's economic situation at the time. The decision was arrived at in the midst of the country's worst economic recession, with foreign remittances from migrant workers at a record low (Arambepola, 2022), raising questions on the logic of imposing and thereafter easing the restriction on migrant women. The shift in positions also illustrates the state's arbitrary power to impose, make changes, and also withdraw its decisions in relation to women's right to work. As Abeysekera and Jayasundere (2015) argue, these conditions and the degree of scrutiny of the private lives of these women, constitute a form of state violence directed at women who wish to migrate for work overseas.

## **Implications of the FBR**

The continued imposition of such a restrictive regulation, in spite of evidence that mobility restrictions are counter-productive, affects women in multiple ways. Their ability to make decisions about work, family, and therefore productive and reproductive labour is curtailed; women must also contend with a bureaucratic structure that seeks to prevent them from migrating. These encounters have potentially far-reaching implications for the women and their families but also demonstrate how the state attempts to contain the space within which women must operate. The following section discusses some of these implications.

### **Women as unfit mothers and liars**

The imposition of the FBR regulation has been criticized globally, because it breeds corruption and encourages unsafe migration for women (United States Department of State, 2017), without addressing the core problems that push women to migrate in the first place (ILO, 2018b; Weeraratne, 2021). At its core, is the issue of care work and how women are seen as the only and irreplaceable individuals who can perform the role of the primary caregiver. In discussions with government officials who are assigned the task of investigating the lives of these aspiring migrant women, this key factor becomes clear.

The substitute caregiver is, at most times, considered to be unsuited for the job of looking after the children in the mother's absence. Grandmothers, who have traditionally stepped into providing care for children of migrant women (Gamburd, 2020) are viewed as too old and unable to support the children, especially as the father is considered incapable or not suited to provide any form of care to the children. Hence, the burden is placed on the aspiring migrant woman, and not the father of the children, to find a suitable replacement – someone not too old and capable enough of looking after the children in her absence.

In setting these stipulations and devising subjective means to ascertain the suitability of the candidates, the FBR regulation has effectively placed migrant women as “bad mothers” who seek to leave their children behind in unsafe and unsupervised environments. This, in turn, contributes towards the notion that left-behind children “suffer” in the absence of the mother, evident in them lagging behind in studies and falling prey to anti-social behaviour. Hence, the stability and the well-being of the family as a unit is placed squarely within the purview of the mother. This has also justified the interventions of the state, via these

Development Officers, to ensure that the children receive protection and their well-being is assured.

On the other hand, what the FBR effectively has done is formalise the informal relationships that women negotiated in order to migrate. Mothers, sisters or a close female relative was relied upon to support the children during the absence of the mother. Such negotiations appear to have worked to a large extent because of mutual understanding. Rather than seek ways to balance the relationships within the family ensuring that men can play an equal supportive role and thereby assume caregiver responsibilities, the FBR regulation has clearly placed the caregiver burden on a close female relative.

That such substitute women must be not too old and not too young and their “appropriateness” is determined by government officials raises further questions on who determines the suitability. This, in turn, adds further pressure on the migrant woman as she needs to negotiate with her kin and perhaps, at times, translate social transactions to financial transactions to ensure that the substitute caregiver supports the aspiring migrant worker’s FBR application. State-sanctioned restrictions can result in the “commodification of care” (Coe, 2011).

Equally worrying is the FBR regulation and how it is being administered is reinforcing the idea that aspiring migrant women are “bad mothers.” This is clearly a tension that Development officers encounter in investigating the lives of the women. Multiple interviews with such officers point to how the women “hide the children” to prevent their FBR from being rejected. In the eyes of the officer, these women are “liars” and “shrewd” (kattai in Sinhala) who try to hoodwink the officers. Hence, the importance of not being complacent and carrying out thorough investigations into the information provided by the women.

This kind of sentiment has received further credence from other government officers who make up the membership of the FBR review committee at the Divisional Secretariat (DS) level. Women Development Officers (WDOs) and officers in charge of child rights and child protection find their role within the committee to be in direct conflict with their roles and responsibilities (ILO, 2018b). As officers reporting to the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, they seek to protect the family unit and ensure that children have an enabling environment to grow. In this context, migrant women are an aberration as they seek to exit the nuclear family and reject their assigned role of primary caregiver. As many of them consistently point out, the mother plays a critical role in the child’s well-being – a role

that no other individual, including the father, can play. Hence, the need to ensure that the woman remains within the household, even when the economic conditions may push women to consider migrating.

As pointed out by others, care work or transnational mothering does not necessarily only involve providing emotional care from afar. This also involves a key responsibility: providing financial stability to her family, especially for the children, and ensuring they continue their education (ILO, 2018a). This extension of care work to also include paid work and raising an income to support the children is a factor the government representatives are clearly aware of. However, the question of whether women have access to sustainable, well-paid jobs in Sri Lanka that would allow them to meet these care responsibilities is a question that continues to be unaddressed.

The inability of the officials to consider the father as a viable alternative carer mirrors public and media perceptions that husbands of migrant women are alcoholics and cannot be relied upon to step in and assume some care responsibilities. The ideal nuclear family unit and its survival, therefore, hinges on the woman staying within it and compensating for any shortcomings of the male breadwinner.

## **Undermining policy commitments**

As a policy stance, the imposition of the FBR regulation upends Sri Lanka's existing policy commitments. Apart from violating the right to mobility and the right to work (Parliament Secretariat, 2021) embedded within the Sri Lankan constitution, this regulation has also undermined the state's commitments towards encouraging labour force participation among women and limited the opportunities women have to realise their idea of "motherhood" by denying them to seek relatively higher-paying, lower-skilled work overseas while making alternative care arrangements for their children. This policy stance further erodes Sri Lanka's own National Labour Migration Policy which has sought to encourage safe labour migration for both women and men and support the families left behind with sustained attention. Overseeing these responsibilities at the ground level falls on the Development Officers who are unable to do so as they focus most of their time on implementing the FBR regulation (ILO, 2018b).

But more disturbing is the policy direction of the Ministry in charge of women's "empowerment." The marrying of women's affairs with child's affairs via the Ministry portfolio, suggests that the mother and child are inherently linked – a tie that cannot be broken at any cost. But just as the

courts refused to consider a Fundamental Rights petition on the grounds that the rights of the child are more important than the right of the woman to migrate (ILO, 2018a), the Ministry has a clear mandate to prioritise the children's well-being over that of the mother. While this may render some positive outcomes for women's health and well-being, the failure or the inability to recognize and acknowledge women's evolving roles within the household, especially as they redefine the role of the primary caregiver to include assuming the responsibilities of raising an income, leaves the families and the women who are attempting to respond to economic difficulties, outside of any form of viable support.

As discussed in the literature, what the Ministry continues to adhere to, is a form of "traditional mothering," where unpaid care work must be performed by the mother as the father – absent or otherwise – is the patriarch, the head of the household and the main breadwinner. While women may supplement the household income and the Ministry supports such endeavours through the extension of support for "cottage" industries that can be done in the house or in close proximity, any attempts to leave the family for longer periods of time or to become the principal income earner are considered "detrimental" to the well-being of the family. It is this notion that the Cabinet Paper titled "Imposition of limitations on the migration of mothers in order to ensure the welfare of children" tabled by the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment sought to institutionalise as early as 2007 and inevitably the FBR regulation legitimized. In it, the Ministry argues that children of migrant women lack due protection and are neglected with their health and nutrition suffering in the absence of the mother. Hence, the recommendation to ban women with children under the age of five years from migrating.

The Development officers thus become the "agents" of the state who implement these gender ideologies on the ground. As evidenced above, they see their role primarily as a means to ensure that the family unit remains intact. Serious concerns however can be raised regarding how far these officials would go to ensure that families remain together especially where abusive relationships, absent fathers/spouses and inadequate incomes – all reasons cited by women to migrate overseas – threaten the well-being of the children within the nuclear family.

In short, as part of the GoSL's institutional framework, these officials become the arbiters of determining who constitutes a good mother in the context of Sri Lanka. Through the complex process institutionalized via the FBR regulation, the officials have been in some ways "weaponized" to monitor and punish women who may seek to leave the children behind, even when the basic conditions of the FBR regulation are

met. In doing so, they support the upholding of an ideal family and a traditional concept of mothering that fails to capture and adapt to the ever-evolving nature of the Sri Lankan family. The shortcomings of this rigid approach to ensuring the family unit stays intact are highlighted when considering how aspiring migrant workers continue to migrate, regardless of the mobility restriction.

## **Increasing vulnerabilities and risks of migration**

The impact of the FBR regulation has also changed how women have to now navigate the migration infrastructure to secure work. On the surface level, for attempting to monetise caregiving and domestic chores by assuming domestic worker roles abroad, women are punished and pulled back into the family fold. But this has also not stopped women from migrating altogether. As Weeraratne's (2016) analysis has pointed out, while the official stock of female migrant workers has declined, women continue to use "irregular" channels to migrate, partly by using visit visas to leave Sri Lanka and reach their destination countries such as the United Arab Emirates. This, however, has raised fresh concerns regarding unsafe and costly migration trajectories for women, as they have to rely on multiple actors to overcome the FBR hurdle.

At the national level, as the GoSL pursues a policy of promoting skilled workers, domestic workers become further marginalised. A more recent analysis (Weeraratne, 2021) also highlights the discriminatory nature of the FBR regulation since the higher-skilled female workers appear to be mostly unaffected by the FBR regulation. Despite the importance of securing work as domestic workers to sustain their families, discounting and pushing migrant domestic work to the margins of migrant labour will have the impact of reinforcing the 3D (dirty, dangerous, demeaning) label on these workers. They will continue to lack access to comprehensive protection of the state and access to decent work conditions. In doing so, avenues to access paid care work for migrant women will remain a dangerous and risky venture.

Moreover, as the official migration patterns change, we are yet to see scrutiny of the role of the fathers in the family and the possible impact on children's well-being. At present, men are framed as ideal migrant workers in the eyes of the state: they are perceived to be skilled and fit to work, (unlike domestic workers), require few protections (unlike domestic workers) and can earn higher incomes (unlike domestic workers). They are also absolved of family responsibilities, especially



in the case of taking care of children. Hence, the narrative of the male migrant worker as a “hero” of the nation has taken root, at the expense of ensuring broader protection for female domestic workers.

## **Absence of State support**

Absent in many of the discussions around mobility restrictions placed on women is the question of the state’s role in providing or facilitating access to care services. The framing of care responsibilities as women’s work helps sustain patriarchal ideologies of gendered roles and the power asymmetries that favour men over women in both the public and private spheres. While the state is withdrawing its role in extending care support in the global north, in Sri Lanka, the concern stems from the near absence of state support for women who seek to work. Successive governments, on one hand, have declared their intentions to encourage women into the labour force, but have offered no complementary, comprehensive plan on how care responsibilities may be supported. By maintaining an idealised family where the mother will provide care for the children and the elderly, the state places the provision of care in the hands of the women. This allows the state to maintain a minimal role in supporting the families to provide care for the children and the elderly.

Continuing to place the responsibility of care on women has long-term implications, especially in light of the demographic shift of a rapidly ageing population. By placing the responsibility of care for an inter-generational household on the family and the women within it, the women are expected to sacrifice their individual aspirations for the betterment of the collective. For Sri Lankan women who wish to enter the labour force, regardless of their migration status, the cost of entering the labour market will remain too high.

Understanding how mobility restrictions such as the FBR regulation impact women, requires that we examine the underlying assumptions and ideologies that shaped the decision by the state. While the imposition of the FBR regulation has exposed migrant women to corruption and exploitation, it has also exposed how attempts to reconfigure social relations places women in a vulnerable position vis-a-vis, the state.

## Conclusion

Once considered “frontier women” for challenging the state promotion of labour migration as a strategy to be adopted by men, migrant women continue to counter the dominant narrative of framing women as primary caregivers and secondary breadwinners.

That women continue to migrate despite these multiple stipulations and a policy stance that is clearly positioned to favour men over women, suggests that women continue to resist these attempts to narrowly frame their mothering role within the family. They are not merely caregivers to the children and the infirm. By seeking work overseas as paid care workers, they seek to redefine their roles within their families as well as the labour force. But how far such forms of resistance can be sustained, especially when the state withdraws its support to lower-skilled, poorer female migrant workers, remains unanswered. While the pursuit of promoting skilled migration may constitute a positive step in the right direction, the impact on marginalised women, especially those who seek to receive financial compensation for otherwise unpaid care work, must receive more sustained attention.

The continued imposition of the FBR regulation also shows up the regressive nature of Sri Lanka’s policy landscape as it seeks to pursue an ideal of a family that may, in practice, not exist. In failing to recognise how the paid and unpaid care work coalesce and evolve over time and space, the GoSL may find itself incapable of responding in a meaningful manner to the changes afoot. The decision to ease the restriction also shows the state’s ambivalence in relation to migrant women. With the power and the discretion to withdraw this temporary reprieve, the state continues to place migrant women in a tenuous position of having to negotiate a complex state structure in order to secure permission to work. In this push to maintain the fable of an ideal family, the children of Sri Lankan female migrant workers may not receive the necessary support and protection the state is bound to provide.

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# **Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Recognizing, Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka**

**Sunimalee Madurawala**

## **Introduction**

Unpaid work is an everyday feature of everyone's life, and it contributes to supporting the well-being of individuals, households and communities (International Labour Organization, 2020). However, the contribution made from unpaid work often remains invisible, both in policies and statistics. Unpaid care and domestic work refer to all non-market, unpaid activities carried out in households – including direct care of persons, such as children or elderly, and indirect care, such as cooking, cleaning or fetching water (Da Silva, 2019). Age, gender, type of household structure, social class, geographical location, and children's presence are some of the important factors that determine the overall division of time between paid and unpaid work (Antonopoulos R. , 2009). Traditionally, around the globe, unpaid care and domestic work are considered 'women's work'. Such care work directly impacts females' ability to participate in the paid economy, leading to gender gaps in employment outcomes, wages and pensions (Da Silva, 2019). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted on 25th September 2015 at the United Nations General Assembly are a collection of seventeen interlinked global goals. Sri Lanka is one of 193 member states that agreed on the summit's outcome document, "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." This is a very comprehensive agenda which will serve as the launching pad for action by the international community and by the national governments to promote shared prosperity and well-being for all. The seventeen SDGs and the associated 169 targets are expected to be achieved by 2030. Out of these seventeen SDGs, goal number five is gender equality. Target 5.4 of the SDGs urges countries to recognise

and value unpaid care and domestic work through public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.

In this context, the paper explores Sri Lanka's status of recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work and identifies the gaps and challenges for Sri Lanka in achieving SDG target 5.4.

## **Unpaid Care and Domestic Work**

Any direct care activity performed without payment that provides a nurturing service such as childcare and care for the elderly, sick, or disabled to meet the needs of dependent persons can be identified as unpaid care work. In broader terms, any direct or indirect care activity performed without payment is considered unpaid care work. In this sense, childcare, elder care, cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood, and household chores can be regarded as unpaid care work if these are performed without expecting any payment in return. Even though recognised as work, these activities are not included in the system of national accounts (SNA). In some cases (e.g., activities like fetching water/fuel) may be theoretically included but are often not well documented or accounted for. Unpaid care work is also known as household production or non-market production and is usually done by and for family members. Depending on income, market conditions, and personal inclinations, these activities can be replaced by market goods or delegated to someone outside the household members as a paid service (Lourdes, Berik, & Floro, 2015). Table 1 presents the categories and describes the types of care work.

**Table 1:** Categories and Types of Care Work

		Children	Elderly
Unpaid work (outside SNA)	Direct care	Changing diapers	Spoon-feeding or bathing
	Indirect care	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning
Unpaid subsistence production (inside SNA)	Direct care	Breastfeeding	
	Indirect care	Growing food for own consumption, collecting wood, or carrying water	Growing food for own consumption, collecting wood, or carrying water
Informal market work	Direct care	Family day care; babysitting	Family day care; elder sitting
	Indirect care	Domestic servant: paid or unpaid family worker in a small service enterprise	Domestic servant: paid or unpaid family worker in a small service enterprise
Paid employment	Direct care	Childcare worker, teacher, paediatrician	Elder care worker, gerontologist
	Indirect care	School administrator, clerical, food services, or janitorial	Nursing home administrator, clerical, food services, or janitorial

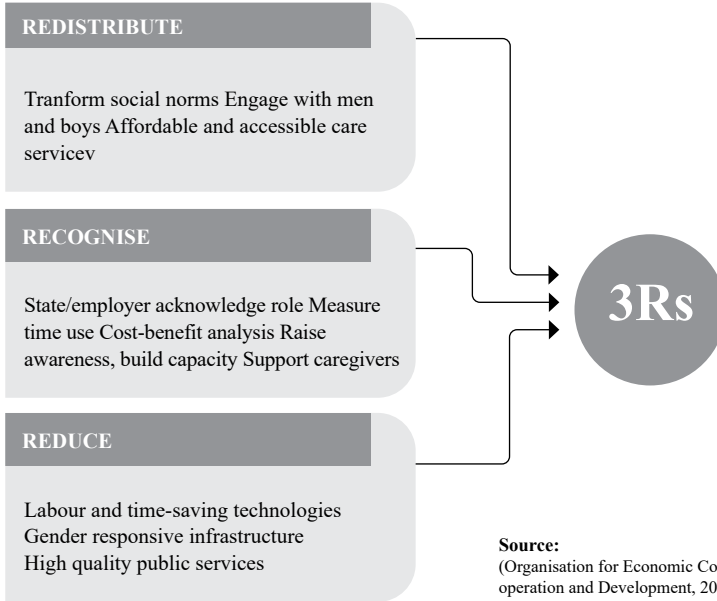
Source: (Folbre, 2006)



Sick, Disabled	Adults (Other than Self)	Self
Spoon-feeding or bathing	Counselling	Visiting doctor, exercising
Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning	Preparing food, doing laundry, cleaning
Growing food for own consumption, collecting wood, or carrying water	Growing food for own consumption, collecting wood, or carrying water	Growing food for own consumption, collecting wood, or carrying water
Informal but paid assistance in the home		
Domestic servant: paid or unpaid family worker in a small service enterprise	Domestic servant: paid or unpaid family worker in a small service enterprise	
Nurse, nursing aide, doctor	Counsellor, nutritionist, yoga instructor	
Hospital administrator, clerical, food services, or janitorial	Most paid jobs not listed in other cells.	

Age, gender, household structure, social class, geographical location, and children's presence are crucial factors deciding the overall division of time between paid and unpaid work (Antonopoulos R., 2009). However, traditionally unpaid care and domestic work are considered "women's work" and women bear the greater responsibility to perform these tasks. Globally, women do 76.2% of the global unpaid care work, which is more than three times as much as unpaid care work done by men (Addati, Cattaneo, Esquivel, & Valarino, 2018). In Asia and the Pacific, women's share of unpaid care work rises to 80%. This inequitable gender-based allocation of unpaid care work pushes women into "time poverty," where they have little or no discretion time to participate in activities outside the household, including paid work. As a result, their well-being is undermined, insecurities are generated, financial dependence is fostered, and options for decent work are limited, even to the point of restricting women to low-status, part-time jobs in the informal sector (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, n.d.) Involvement in unpaid care activities negatively affects women's ability to participate in paid work, thus leading to many gender disparities in the labour market, such as gaps in employment outcomes, wages, and pensions. In the rest of the paper, both unpaid and domestic work are referred to as unpaid care work.

Unpaid care work has three interconnected dimensions: recognition, reduction, and redistribution, also known as the 3Rs (Elson, 2000). The Target 5.4 of the SDGs emphasises these 3Rs; recognition and valuation of unpaid care work (recognition) by providing public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies (reduction) and the promotion of shared responsibility at distinct levels – i.e., household, institutional, and national (redistribution) within the household to reduce and redistribute these tasks. For example, lessening women's time collecting water or providing alternatives for childcare are such measures (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:****3Rs Approach - Three Interconnected Dimensions to Address Unpaid Care Work**

## Recognising, Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Care Work

The gendered and voluntary nature of unpaid care work largely contributes to its poor visibility in the economy and its exclusion from the system of national accounts (SNA). Recognising and valuing unpaid care work by including it in national statistics is essential for many reasons. It makes women's economic contributions statistically visible, elevates the societal value of unpaid work, and provides a more comprehensive picture of the goods and services produced within an economy.

In recent years, methods, and techniques such as time use surveys (TUS) have been developed to capture the amount of time spent on various activities by individuals. Unlike labour force surveys (LFS), TUS capture paid work (market activities) as well as unpaid work (non-market activities). As a result, TUS generates more comprehensive information on how people spend their time on diverse activities

uncovering the behavioural choices of individuals in time allocation (reference period, activity, time duration, number of episodes, and the context). Apart from that, TUS also disclose discrepancies in time allocation on variances related to socio-demographic characteristics like gender, age, and geographical location.

Given the nature of unpaid care work, finding the correct unit value of unpaid care work is problematic. Hence, a lack of agreement on the methodology of measuring and valuing unpaid care work persists. Various approaches such as an output-based approach (calculating the cost to purchase an unpaid care service in the market), an input-based approach (measuring and valuing labour inputs into unpaid care work), and other methods (such as opportunity cost, replacement cost) are used to value unpaid care work (Suh, Dorji, Mercer-Blackman, & Hampel-Milagrosa, 2020). However, collecting time-use data is costly, time-consuming, and requires specific capacities compared to other surveys like LFS and income and expenditure surveys. Therefore, not surprisingly, time-use data for developing countries is limited.

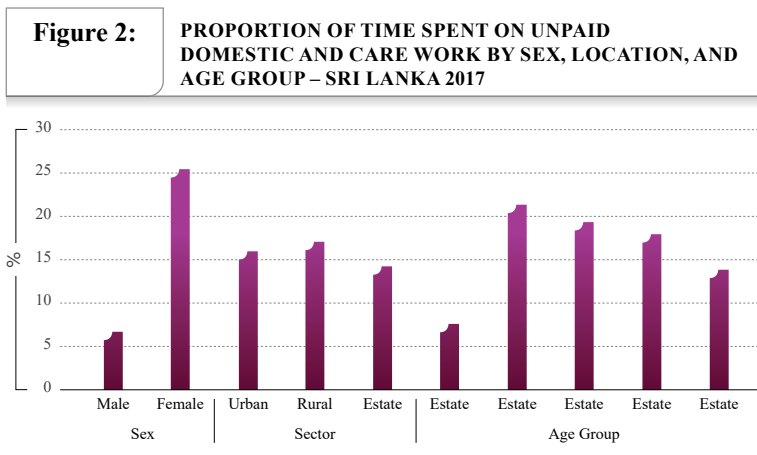
Labour and time and labour-saving technologies (e.g., washing machines and kitchen appliances), gender-responsive infrastructure facilities (by engaging women in infrastructure development, from the identification of priorities to their design and implementation), and supplying high-quality public services reduce the burden of unpaid care work borne by women.

Deep-rooted social norms and gender stereotypes form a society's perceptions and expectations of who is responsible for attending care needs, who needs care and how that care should be delivered. Often across the globe, this is perceived as a responsibility of women. In most societies, women's responsibility of doing care work is taken for granted, and it has become an unquestioned part of daily living. In such contexts, initiatives encouraging behavioural changes and social norms play a vital role in redistributing unpaid care work. Redistribution of unpaid care work should be done within the household and between households and society.

Evidence from literature affirms that unpaid care work by women tends to decline with the level of economic development of a country (Alonso, Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, Kinoshita, & Kochhar, 2019). This is mainly because of the reduction (through better and higher investments in technology and infrastructure) and the redistribution (through shifts in social norms and affordable and accessible care services) of unpaid care work burdens women bear.

## Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka

The indicator proposed to measure progress in SDG Target 5.4 is the proportion of time spent on unpaid care work by sex, location, and age group. Figure 2 below depicts the status of Sri Lanka for indicator 5.4 with the latest available data.

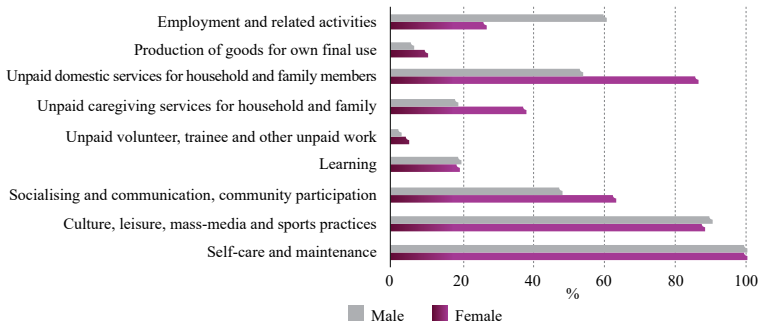


Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020)

Reflecting the global context, Sri Lankan women’s participation in unpaid care work is more than that of men. Men’s participation rate in unpaid care activities was recorded as 19.5% and their participation rate in unpaid domestic activities was 54% (Figure 3). However, women’s participation rates were recorded as 38.4% and 86.4% in participation rates in unpaid care activities and unpaid domestic activities, respectively, indicating an apparent disparity between the two sexes. Moreover, a substantial difference is evident between the time spent by men and women on unpaid care work. While women spent 204 minutes per day on unpaid care activities, men spent only 114 minutes on the same (Figure 4). However, compared with the global and Asian Pacific figures, the distribution of unpaid care work at the household level between women and men in terms of time spent indicates a better status for Sri Lanka. Globally, women spend 265 minutes, and men spend 83 minutes per day on unpaid care work. While women in the Asia and the Pacific region spend 262 minutes on unpaid care work, men spend 64 minutes per day on unpaid care work (Addati, Cattaneo, Esquivel, & Valarino, 2018). Figures 3 and 4 highlight dissimilarities in participation and time allocation for unpaid care work and employment activities (paid work) between the two sexes. Men’s participation and time allocation in paid activities are significantly higher than women’s. In

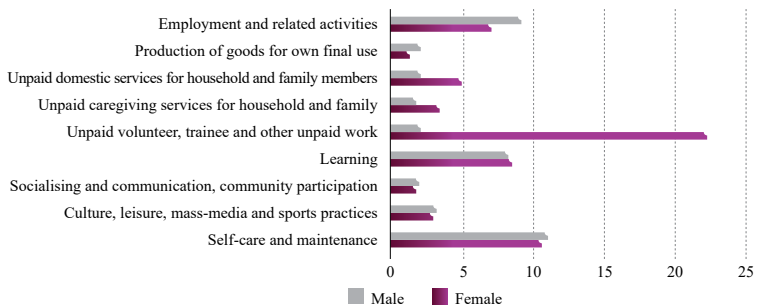
contrast, their participation and time allocation for unpaid care activities are much less than that of women. The opposite is true for women – i.e., less participation in market activities and greater participation in unpaid care activities. This implies a negative correlation between involvement in unpaid care work and labour market engagement.

**Figure 3:** PARTICIPATION RATES IN MAJOR ACTIVITY CATEGORIES BY SEX



Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020)

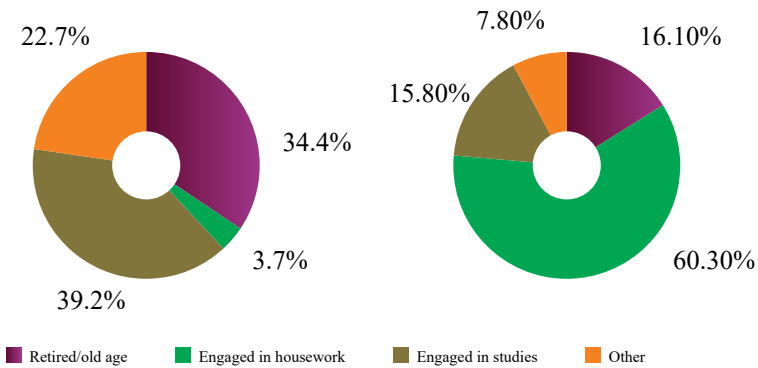
**Figure 4:** MEAN ACTOR TIME (HOURS) PER DAY SPENT ON MAJOR ACTIVITY CATEGORIES BY SEX



Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020)

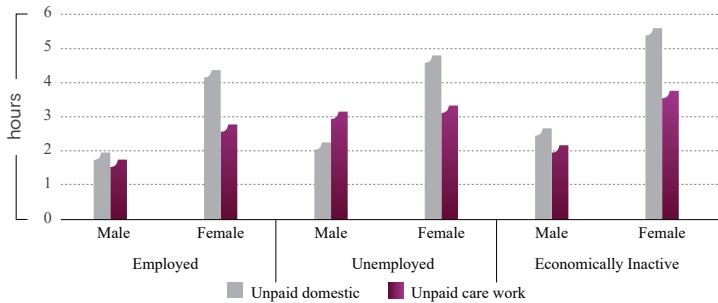
The unpaid care work burden discourages women from engaging in income-earning activities. Of the total economically inactive population in Sri Lanka, 73.5% are females (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2021) Of the economically inactive female population, 60.8% have shown household work as the reason for inactivity (Figure 5). This suggests that most women are unwilling to engage in economic activities due to their household burden. In contrast, merely 3.7% of men stated household work as a reason for inactivity. It also implies that more women who are burdened by unpaid care work may lack financial security due to being out of economic work.

**Figure 5:** REASONS FOR BEING ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE – 2020



Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2021)

The disparity in unpaid care work responsibilities affects not only women’s ability to enter the labour market but also holds negative repercussions on women who are already employed. Despite the labour market status, time spent on unpaid care activities is higher for women than for men (Figure 6). This indicates the gendered nature of unpaid care work and the uneven division of labour (care responsibilities and roles) within households. Moreover, there is only a marginal difference in the amount of time spent on unpaid care activities between employed, and unemployed females. This also points to the “double burden” (the challenge of balancing employment and household responsibilities) employed females face. Economically inactive females spend more time on domestic and care work than employed and unemployed females. As shown in Figure 5, this is the main factor restraining them from participating in labour market activity.

**Figure 6:****MEAN ACTOR TIME SPENT IN UNPAID CARE ACTIVITIES BY LABOUR MARKET STATUS**

Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020)

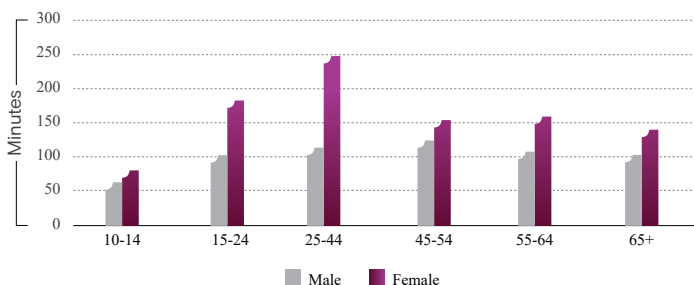
When considering the time spent on unpaid care work by men and women in different sectors, in all three sectors, women's time contribution on unpaid care work is more than of men's (Figure 7). Urban women in Sri Lanka spend more time on unpaid care work than women in other sectors.

**Figure 7:****MEAN ACTOR TIME PER DAY SPENT ON UNPAID CARE WORK BY SECTOR**

Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020)

Women in the 25-44 age category have the highest time contribution on unpaid care work (Figure 8). This could be mainly because women in that age category bear childcare responsibilities. However, men in the same age category spend considerably low amount of time on unpaid care work – with a 132-minute difference per day.



**Figure 8:****MEAN ACTOR TIME PER DAY SPENT ON UNPAID CARE WORK BY AGE GROUP**

Source: (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2020)

## Discussion

### RECOGNITION

Generally, TUS are the most accepted method to estimate unpaid care work. The Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) of Sri Lanka produced its first ever TUS in 2017 with the aim of “providing sound indicators of time use regarding paid work, unpaid work, social life and leisure, and personal care and maintenance.” The 2017 TUS covered 6440 housing units covering all three sectors of the country (1000, 5140, and 300 housing units from the urban, rural, and estate sectors respectively). The survey was carried out as a non-independent survey (i.e., conducted in the same households of the fourth quarter Labour Force Survey (LFS) sample in 2017) and used two data collection instruments: a household questionnaire and a time diary. The main findings from this survey were discussed in the previous section of this paper.

### REDUCTION

Improved and better infrastructure enables the burden of unpaid care to be reduced. Sri Lanka has prioritised developing infrastructure facilities and has successfully provided basic infrastructure facilities to most of its people. Yet, certain areas need improvements. For example, only 88.5% of households have access to safe drinking water, and 2.9% travel more than 500 metres fetching drinking water (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2022). Apart from these inadequacies, policies adopted to enhance infrastructure facilities give inadequate attention

to the provision of these infrastructure facilities in a gender-sensitive manner. For example, even though policies on energy emphasise universal access to affordable and reliable energy, gender sensitivity is minimal in those policies in a context where 57.7% of households use firewood as their principal cooking fuel, and 56.2% of them (primarily women) spend time collecting firewood. Therefore, strategies such as energy conservation and energy efficiency approaches that include interventions in providing cooking fuels and technologies must be gender sensitive (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Likewise, such inadequate integration of gender dimensions into national policies can be seen in other sectors (e.g., transport, water, and sanitation).

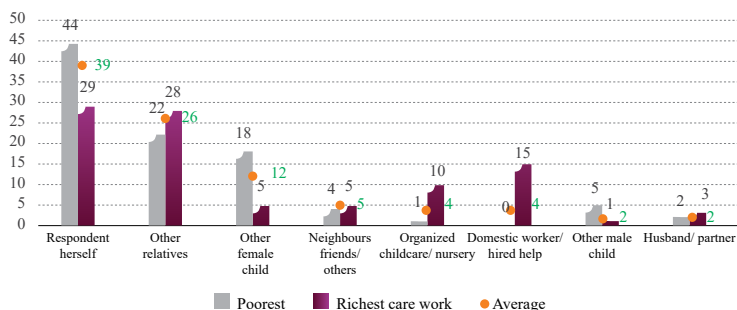
## **REDISTRIBUTION**

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Transforming social norms, engaging with men and boys, and providing affordable and accessible care services are vital approaches to redistributing unpaid care work. However, transforming the patriarchal Sri Lankan culture with its entrenched gender stereotyping is challenging, and requires sustained effort and time. Engaging men and boys is the first step toward such a transformation. Family-friendly policies which encourage a more egalitarian division of responsibilities and roles between men and women within households play a vital role in redistributing unpaid care work. Family-friendly policies aim to help employees manage their family responsibilities, create flexible work conditions, and perform better on domestic and career fronts. These policies produce flexible work conditions and enable women to perform better on both domestic and work fronts (Subramaniam & Selvaratnam, 2010; Beham & Drobnic, 2010).

This evidence clearly implies that family-friendly policies facilitate the process of enhancing women's economic participation. As such, introducing family-friendly policies is crucial to encouraging females to participate in productive economic activities. One such policy measure to redistribute the care burden is introducing affordable and quality childcare facilities with a supporting institutional framework. Evidence from developing and middle-income countries show a strong positive link between access to childcare and maternal labour force participation (Pimkina & De la Flor, 2020; Pimkina & De la Flor, 2020).

However, the available data indicates that few employed women in developing countries have access to organized childcare or nurseries (UNICEF, 2019). On average, only 4% of employed women have access to formal childcare facilities. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in access between the poorest and richest (Figure 9).

**Figure 9:****TYPICAL CHILDCARE ARRANGEMENT FOR EMPLOYED WOMEN WITH CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6**

Source: (UNICEF, 2019)

Note: N=31 developing countries. Surveys were conducted between 1995 and 2002. The indicator corresponds to the percentage of respondents answering the question “Who looks after your children while you are at work?”

Availability of childcare is one of the main determinants of women’s economic participation, and the lack of informal childcare is more of a factor in the decision than the cost of formal childcare (Madurawala, 2009). Informal childcare includes seeking the help of their parents or parents-in-law or extended family to look after their children while they are away at work. There is a greater possibility for mothers to take part in the labour force when they can share their childcare and household responsibilities with others (Premaratne, 2011). The decision to buy formal childcare is affected by the age of the children, cost of day care centres, household income, occupation types, education level, and childcare quality (Premaratne, 2011; Premaratne, 2011). Quality child-care services increase female labour force participation. Also, if childcare is more affordable, more mothers would participate in the labour force. Therefore, it is not simply the availability of childcare but the quality and affordability of childcare services that positively influence female labour force participation. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka is facing a growing need for childcare, with gaps in the existing childcare facilities (Warnasuriya, 2020). The lack of affordable and reliable childcare options has forced many parents to resort to makeshift solutions, highlighting the urgent need for policy interventions to address the issue of childcare.

# The Policy Context of Care Work in Sri Lanka

## CHILD CARE

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Sri Lanka has taken positive steps in providing affordable and accessible care services. For example, in the context of a growing need for childcare and gaps in existing childcare facilities, the need to provide affordable and quality childcare is recognised by formulating national policies that address the issue of childcare.

In terms of recent efforts in recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work by the government of Sri Lanka (GOSL), the National Policy for Child Day Care Centres (Draft) presented by the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs in 2019 and the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (Draft) can be regarded as positive steps. The National Policy for Child Day Care Centres aims to ensure the availability of quality, affordable, and accessible day care services in the country and encourage parents (particularly mothers) to accept or return to employment by making day care services available. The National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development has paid attention to providing affordable and quality childcare. However, both these documents are still at the draft stage, and it is vital to take measures to accelerate the policy formulation process and bring these to the implementation stage. The Budget Speech 2019 identified unpaid care work as a critical reason for women to leave or never enter the labour force. Therefore, it offered redistributing arrangements by proposing the establishment of day care facilities by commercial entities, the private sector, and schools.

## ELDERLY CARE

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The main legislative provisions related to elderly care are the Protection of the Rights of the Elders Act No. 9 of 2000 and the Protection of the Rights of Elders (Amendment) Act, No. 5 of 2011. Act. No. 9 of 2000, which established the National Council for Elders and the National Secretariat for Elders. The principal function of the council is the promotion and protection of the welfare and the rights of elders in Sri Lanka and to assist to live with self-respect, independence, and dignity (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 2000). Furthermore, the council is also responsible for encouraging the establishment of welfare centres, recreation centres, day care centres, and other appropriate institutions with accommodation for destitute elders and to provide the necessary facilities to such centres and

institutions. The National Secretariat for Elders was established under the Protection of the Rights of Elders Act No. 9 of 2000 and functions under the Ministry of Social Empowerment and Welfare. It is the prime administrative body engaged in implementing programmes approved by the Council for Elders. The National Charter and National Policy for Elders were formulated as per the Madrid Plan of Action and was adopted by the Cabinet in 2006. The Charter gives priority to three areas: (i) elders and development, (ii) advancing health and well-being, and (ii) ensuring an enabling and supportive environment.

## **Investing in Unpaid Care Work**

Investing in infrastructure facilities that would ease the unpaid care burden of women is important in reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. Yet, Sri Lanka's current commitment to investing in unpaid care work is not at a satisfactory level. For example, currently, Sri Lanka spends only 0.0001% of the gross domestic production (GDP) on early childhood development, and it is one of the world's lowest rates (International Finance Corporation, 2018). It has been estimated that return on early childhood programs can be as high as 13.7% and such programmes have the potential of raising individual adult income by 25% (International Finance Corporation, 2018). Given the current economic crisis and limited fiscal space experienced by the country, pushing for investments in unpaid care work would be challenging. However, the literature suggests that investments which support households to better cope with their unpaid care responsibilities have multiple economic benefits such as economic growth, job creation, and other key government priorities in turn (Chan, 2018). As discussed earlier, the amount of time devoted to unpaid care work is negatively correlated with female labour force participation. It has been estimated that a reduction in women's unpaid care work is related to a ten-percentage point increase in the labour force participation rate of women (for a given level of GDP per capita, fertility rate, female unemployment rate, female education, urbanisation rate, and maternity leave) (Ferrant, Pesando, & Nowacka, 2014). Moreover, a study done in seven countries indicates that an investment of 2% of GDP in the care industry would increase the overall employment and that increase would range from 2% to 6% (De Henau, Himmelweit, Lapniewska, & Perrons, 2016). Furthermore, investments made in childcare and social care also address some of the critical economic and social problems such as low productivity, the care deficit, demographic changes, and continuing

gender inequality in paid and unpaid work (De Henau, Himmelweit, Lapniewska, & Perrons, 2016). Hence, investing in unpaid care work needs to be considered as an opportunity for economic development and it is important to consider it as a priority area for investment.

## Conclusions

Unpaid care and domestic responsibilities function as key barriers for women to take part in market activities, thus hindering their economic empowerment. Social norms and perceptions, asymmetric division of labour at the household level, issues in accessibility and affordability of technologies, and lack of gender sensitivity in infrastructure policies and programmes make unpaid care work a heavy burden for women. The above also contribute to gendering care work, making unpaid care work less visible and having less recognition. The available evidence suggests that there are gaps which deter Sri Lanka's progress in achieving SDG Target 5.4., especially in the areas of reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work. Furthermore, it is important for the policy makers to recognise the economic benefits of investing in unpaid care work and see it as an opportunity for the country's development. In this context, the country needs to pay more attention and put more effort, coordination, and resources into progressing towards achieving SDG Target 5.4

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# **Unpaid but Repaid: Generalized Reciprocity and Women's Care Work in Rural Families**

**Michele Ruth Gamburd**

## **Research questions and theoretical approaches: The cultural construction of identity, political economics, and generalized reciprocity**

Three branches of theory inform this discussion of women's unpaid care work in rural Sri Lanka. The first relates to questions of gender identity, the second to the political economics of care work, and the third to generalize reciprocity within the family.

To approach the question of gender, I first examine how the cultural construction of identity relates to the politics of representation. As a practice theorist, I ask how identity categories get created and how they are reproduced and transformed through everyday people's ordinary actions. Practice theorists understand that humans live and act in worlds with material and social constraints. At the same time, humans themselves create the structures (the rules for behaviour) that guide how we act and how we interpret the actions of others. The structures have considerable authority, but the same processes that lead to their reproduction also lead to transformation. Both reproduction and change take place through ordinary people's everyday actions.

Borrowing from Ortner (2006), I think of real life as a "serious game." Like actual games, serious games have rules. People play on teams, and they compete for prizes. In real life, however, people often play multiple games at the same time, and they can find that their own pursuits get sidetracked when they get co-opted to play on someone else's team to accomplish someone else's project. (For example, I might have a project of reading a book on the couch, but get co-opted into cooking dinner with my sister.)

Practice theorists recognize that identity politics usually get deployed for economic reasons; thus, the cultural construction of identity relates directly to political economics, my second chosen area of theory. Various types of people get assigned various types of work. Theorists need to ask “what’s at stake?” in the politics of representation. Who benefits, who loses, and how do they gain or lose, from particular constructions of identity? For example, Edward Said (1978) shows that the construction of an “Oriental” identity during the colonial period provided a justification – even an imperative – for empire. Similarly, Thomas Biolsi (2007) illustrates that cultural constructions of racial identity in the United States in the mid-1800s supported the appropriation of Black African-American labour and the takeover of Native American land. In my work, I ask how constructions of gender affect women’s ability to accomplish their projects and constrain the work that is deemed appropriate for their roles. I also ask how these gender roles get reproduced or transformed over time through ordinary activities.

In this essay, I examine the intersection between gender identity and care work through a discussion of the political economics of women’s unpaid labour. I understand political economy as the conjunction between politics (power and authority) and economics (the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services). As noted above, politics shapes who does which work and how much they get paid for it. Understanding identity alone does not suffice; I also want to understand how people “do” economics.

The third area of theory covers forms of economic interaction. For this essay, I consider three different forms of economic exchange: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchanges. In modern society, all three forms exist in tandem. Reciprocity comes in two forms, generalized reciprocity and balanced reciprocity. In generalized reciprocity, often found in family relationships, people exchange with each other freely, but no accounts are kept and no immediate repayment is expected. For example, children are not expected to pay their parents for their lunch or for their clothing and education. In balanced reciprocity, which often occurs between friends, people of relatively equal status exchange things of relatively equal value. For example, one farmer might help another harvest a field, in exchange for the same sort of help for his own crop a week later. Although of roughly equal value, these exchanges are deferred in time, thus creating the necessity of repaying someone later, which prolongs the relationship and sometimes adds an element of competition.

In redistributive exchanges, goods are centralized (often by a leader) and then reallocated, often to the same people who have contributed, though in different proportions. Taxes and tribute count in this category. In stratified societies, the leader often retains some of the gathered goods to support their lifestyle and followers.

In market economies, goods and services are exchanged for money, which provides a system of valuing the item or service. Market exchanges do not create the same sorts of relationships as do reciprocal or redistributive exchanges. In a market exchange, the transaction can be impartial and impersonal, and it ends after the good or service is paid for.

Drawing on ethnographic research on labour migration and elder care, I wish to explore the question of gender and work in light of the theoretical discussion above on identity, political economics, and generalized reciprocity.

When scholars who explore the dynamics of women's unpaid labour do so by monetizing care work, they discuss the market economy in which services receive a wage. In this essay, I instead explore the family zone of generalized reciprocity to ask how women's care work is reciprocated in the family. What does a woman receive over the course of her life in return for her labour? Could such labour be unpaid but also repaid? Are there other "unpaid" exchanges that we need to understand in the equation? How long is the time frame for repayment? What happens if we include other periods of life in the analysis? I understand that women labour in conditions of gendered inequality. I ask whether scholars might fruitfully understand this labour as part of a long-term interaction of generalized reciprocity within the family rather than as a part of a failed market exchange in which labour unfairly does not receive payment.

## **Methodology**

As a cultural anthropologist, I gather data using qualitative research methodologies, particularly interviews and participant observation (Bernard, 2018). The research data analyzed here were gathered during ethnographic fieldwork performed in southwestern Sri Lanka, between Aluthgama and Ambalangoda, in a village that I call Naeagama, which is situated a mile inland from the Galle Road. The majority of the people in Naeagama are of the Halaagama caste. There are about 1250 people in the Grama Niladhari division, which includes a temple and a school as well as several small shops.

Employment for men includes working in the army (though this has diminished in recent years), in the cinnamon industry as peelers and landowners, and in the tourism industry (similarly diminished in recent years due to COVID as well as the nurdle and oil spill in 2021 and the Easter bombings in 2019). Many men also work as day labourers.

Employment for women used to include quite a few people who went abroad to work as housemaids in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. This migration flow diminished after the enforcement in June 2013 of the Family Background Report circular that prohibits the migration of women with children under the age of 5 and requires extensive paperwork and surveillance for the families of women who have children between 5 and 18. Women may begin migrating again, now that the government has revised the policy (Ceylon Today, 2022; Mudugamuwa, 2022). Women also work as teachers, hold other white- or pink-colour jobs, and assist their families in cinnamon processing activities.

On the topic of labour migration, I have gathered information in Naeaegama since October 1992 (Gamburd, 2000). I feel that my research on migrant domestic workers enables me to think about monetizing care work and the changing context for valuing women's domestic labour. Between 2009 and 2019, I examined issues of ageing and care work (Gamburd, 2021). My work on ageing gives me a window into the exchanges of property (through inheritance) and end-of-life care that take place within households. These perspectives assist in recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work.

## **Case studies**

The evidence for my argument comes from four case studies. One case provides an example of the Naeaegama practice of virilocal ultimogeniture, in which the youngest son and his wife inherit the family home along with the obligation to care for the son's parents as they age. The second case explores the situation of a Naeaegama household badly affected by the Family Background Report, which barred a young woman's migration and curtailed her family's financial options in damaging ways. The third case relates to an elderly man's threats to leave his family home and go live in a for-pay Old Folks Home, and the fourth examines the religious beliefs and charitable practices of people in the Naeaegama area who provision a local non-paying old folks' home through almsgivings, supporting needy elders as they would Buddhist monks in temples or children in orphanages.

These four cases help me explore the concept of unpaid labour through the theoretical frameworks of gender identity, political economy, and generalized reciprocity.

## **Case 1: Inheritance of care work and home: Daughter-in-law Darshini cares for Regina**

The first case represents the default expectations around the care for elders and the inheritance of the family home. Both care work and shelter are vital aspects of the social reproduction of the family. I think of social reproduction on two timescales. The first is the day-to-day timescale, which involves each day making sure that the members of the household are clothed, fed, and have the things they need (e.g., bus fare, school books and medicine) to get through the day. Care work in this context includes the bodily care for infants and frail elders, the cooking and cleaning that happens in the house, and the wage labour that brings money (or goods such as food) into the dwelling. The work also involves the emotional labour of keeping positive social relationships inside the house and keeping good relationships with the neighbours and kin network.

The second timescale for social reproduction is the generational one. How does a household reproduce itself from one generation to the next? In other words, what do people need to do today so that, in 20 years, people who are children today have homes and families of their own? What do people need to do today so that, in 20 years, people who are adults now are cared for when they are elderly? The work involved in this context includes making sure that land is bought, that dwellings are built and maintained, that children get educations, that people get jobs, and that rites of passage are taken care of (e.g., birth rituals, rice weaning ceremonies, coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and the like). The big tasks here are buying land, building houses (for sons), saving for dowries (for daughters), paying for tuition classes, and arranging (expensive) rituals such as puberty ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and almsgivings (daanas).

In Naeaegama, families follow virilocal ultimogeniture. Following a virilocal residence pattern means that daughters marry “out” and sons stay in the village. Ultimogeniture means that the youngest son inherits the family home along with the responsibility of taking care of the parents. Families find property outside the mahagedera (ancestral home) for older sons.

One case exemplifies how families accomplish the long-term social reproduction of families in Naeaegama. Darshini is an in-marriage daughter-in-law whose husband is the youngest son of his parents' many children. Darshini and her husband live in the family's mahagedera. Darshini cared for her father-in-law until his death. Thereafter she continued to care for her mother-in-law, Regina, who suffered from dementia, until her death.

In the United States, a bed at a memory-care facility costs upward of US\$ 7,000 a month. Such care facilities rely for labour on immigrant women who receive low levels of compensation (Buch, 2018; Coe, 2019). Individuals living in such institutions run through their savings quickly, and families bankrupt themselves to receive and provide this sort of care. Similar memory care provided in the home, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, costs even more.

In Naeaegama, no one ever questioned the arrangement that Regina would receive memory care in her home from her son and daughter-in-law. Everyone saw the arrangement as Regina's right and her son and daughter-in-law's duty. Is Darshini's work unpaid? Yes. Was similar care work that Regina did in her younger years for her children and parents unpaid? Yes. But I argue that Regina's work was definitely repaid. One might ask whether Darshini may have done more than her share of the care. But Regina got to age at home, surrounded by family, which researchers see as an ideal arrangement.

Another metaphor comes to mind. In the United States, elders can do a "reverse mortgage" and continue to live at home while slowly selling their property to the bank and receiving a fixed amount of money each month. Is care work "unpaid" if Sri Lankan elders transfer their property to their younger kin in exchange for care? Children in Naeaegama do not buy their houses from their parents; instead, inheritance hinges on the expectation and delivery of long-term care work.

In an interview, Darshini told me that people in Naeaegama expected the youngest son to inherit both the family home and the responsibility to care for his parents. Sometimes elders wrote a will to "write" the house to the youngest, but in other cases, they did not. Regina and her husband had not done so. Legally, the family home and land belonged equally to all of Darshini's husband's siblings. However, Darshini hoped that they would recognize the care work that she had done for her in-laws and deed the shares of the family home to her and her husband.

Does the transfer of property from the older couple to the younger couple compensate the younger couple for the care of the older couple? In Naeaegama, people do not see this exchange as a form of “payment,” because people resist the idea that parents would have to “pay” their children for care. Indeed, a common phrase suggests that “children are debtors” (*lamayo naya kariyo*) and owe their parents everything for the care that the parents provided them when they were young. Buddhist doctrine instructs children to care for their parents; the doctrine coincides with the expectation of generalized reciprocity between family members. At the same time, considering economics (the exchange of goods and services), I see a substantial transfer of assets taking place at the end of the period during which the younger generation takes care of frail elders. The care work is not wage labour compensated by the hour, but it forms a part of the longer-term social reproduction of the family. The care work, although unpaid, is compensated with the transfer of valuable assets (house and land).

The youngest son inherits the property but his wife does the lion’s share of the care work. The fairness of this transfer of assets depends on the idea that the couple will not divorce, which can tie women to bad marriages because they do not have anywhere else to live. Unless a will specifies otherwise, a wife inherits half of the house after the death of her husband; ownership of the other half goes equally to the children. The youngest son inherits the land and house if his mother and father deed it to him, his siblings give it to him, or he buys it from his siblings (the latter option blurring the line between reciprocity and market exchange).

This case illustrates that, in the long arc of the reproduction of the family, women perform a great deal of care work for their families. In the short term, women in the “sandwich generation” (who care for both children and elders) engage in a great deal of what could be called “unpaid labour.” In the long term, however, I argue that elderly women may be repaid for their care work when members of the younger generation care for them as they age. Care work done within the family is unpaid but repaid.

## **Case 2: Family Background Report: Parakrama and Deepthi’s family**

Since the early 1980s, many adult women in Naeaegama have worked in the Middle East as domestic servants. They go abroad on two-year contracts, often returning to the same employer for multiple contracts.

Some families use the remittances for daily needs (the short-term reproduction of the family), but many plan for the husband to support those needs while the wife working abroad saves her earnings for bigger projects such as buying land, building a house, funding dowries for daughters, or making business investments (the long-term reproduction of the family).

Between 1992 and 2019, many Naeaagama families built new cement homes. Some funded the construction with wages earned by men who worked in the armed services, but many others funded the construction with money earned by women working as domestic servants in the Persian Gulf. These women made concrete investments in the long-term social reproduction of their families by moving them out of clay houses with coconut-frond roofs and mud floors into cement houses with metal or tile or asbestos sheet roofs and solid floors. They also invested in toilets, wells, and parapet walls around their properties.

Women's labour migration sensitized people in Naeaagama to the fact that care work is "work" by making clear to migrants and their families that the same services that women performed for free at home for their families had monetary value when performed for employers abroad in the international labour market.

The Family Background Report (FBR) Policy implemented in June 2013 altered migration patterns. This government policy (Ministry of Foreign Employment, 2015) forbade women with children under the age of five from working abroad, and it required women who have children between the ages of five and eighteen to submit their family's care-giving arrangements for scrutiny to a phalanx of government administrators. Women who wished to fill in a Family Background Report needed to acquire their husbands' signatures, and they needed to show that someone (unofficially, a woman under the age of 60) could serve as the primary caregiver for the child or children. The policy also put an upper age limit on work in the Gulf for women; women over 55 could not travel to work as housemaids.

Government policies can and do affect issues of unpaid care work. The FBR policy made a number of implicit assumptions about care work. First, it assumed that only the biological mother could adequately care for a child, and that therefore she had to stay home with the child throughout the first five years of the child's life. Second, it assumed that other adults, including the father, any other male kin, and any female kin over the age of 60, could not adequately assume caregiving roles.



The assumptions in the policy ran counter to assumptions that migrants and their families in Naeaegama used before 2013. Although families recognized the importance of a mother's love for her child, they pragmatically noted that the provision of economic goods (such as food, clothing, shelter, and funds for tuition classes and dowries) superseded care work. If a father could not earn enough to support the family or help it "get ahead," then the mother needed to do so.

The FBR policy reversed over thirty years of rural women's economic empowerment and revalued the labour of women in the household. It took the labour of young mothers firmly out of the global economy and rooted it in the household, and it negated the value of care work done by older women (grandmothers), who have traditionally looked after younger members of the household (grandchildren) even before the migration of women to the Middle East. In another venue, I have put the care contributions of elders into conversation with the 2013 Family Background Report Policy (Gamburd, 2021), noting the erasure of grandparents' kin-work and their concomitant inability to contribute to the overall financial well-being of their households.

The policy caused lots of uproar in Colombo (Women and Media Collective, 2016) and abroad (United Nations, 2014, 2015), but it seems quite popular at the local level. The government framed the policy as a mechanism to protect children and get mothers "back home where they belong." Local people found it difficult to unpack the issues without seeming to speak against the importance of motherhood itself. Further research should address how these gendered discourses about women's care work change now that the government has relaxed the FBR policy and allowed more women to travel internationally for work.

Considering Sri Lanka's changing demographics, the World Bank (2008) suggests that, as Sri Lanka's population ages, it is imperative to keep elders in the job market. By undermining elderly women's ability to serve their families by enabling their daughters' and daughters-in-laws' migration, the FBR policy moves in exactly the wrong direction.

The authors of the FBR policy seemed to seek social recognition for the value of women's care work. I would argue, however, that disempowering mothers and grandmothers created exactly the opposite effect, assuming that mothers "must" be at home (to do all that unpaid work, presumably) and that women over 60 are too old to be caregivers for their grandchildren.

In addition to disempowering two generations of women economically, the policy also endangered the financial stability of Naeaagama families who had in the past relied on labour migration as an important employment opportunity. For example, consider Parakrama and his wife, Deepthi, who worked abroad for many years. Parakrama's mother and father also worked abroad at various times. The four adults and several children lived together in Parakrama's parents' home. Before the implementation of the FBR policy, while Deepthi and Parakrama worked abroad, Parakrama's mother, Krishanthi, looked after their child. Parakrama came home, as did Deepthi, and they started up a vehicle repair garage. Neither of them had any experience with that line of work, and the mechanic they hired did not work out. The business failed, bankrupting them.

Parakrama used the last of the family's savings to go back to the Gulf. He tried but failed to get another job. While Parakrama and Deepthi were home, Deepthi had gotten pregnant and they had another child. In other time periods, the family would have sent Deepthi back to the Gulf; housemaid jobs are easy to get and, though they do not pay well, she could have earned enough to support the family and pay a job agency to get Parakrama another job in the Middle East. Krishanthi could have looked after this grandchild as she had the older one. But due to the FBR policy, Deepthi was unable to go back to the Gulf. Krishanthi could not go either, being over 55. When I spoke with them in 2018, the entire family was in a panic. Neither Parakrama nor his father could get a job abroad due to a lack of funds to pay a job agent, and neither woman was able to go due to the FBR policy. The baby had four very worried adults around to "care" for it, but no one was able to bring in any money. Eventually, the two men took up Parakrama's father's when-in-Sri-Lanka job of painting houses, and the women started cooking short-eats for a local kade. In 2019, the family subsisted on the edge of poverty, waiting for the baby to turn five so that Deepthi could go abroad again.

When more women could migrate to work as domestic servants in the Persian Gulf, people in Naeaagama more clearly recognized the value of care work; clearly, migrant women did for free at home what they could do for money abroad. Between 2013 and 2022, when the government "benched" its "army of housemaids," and, along with them, its army of grandmothers, the policy reduced the financial stability of families in Naeaagama while also reducing an important avenue of generating much-needed foreign exchange. In the face of the grave financial crisis of 2022, the government relaxed the FRB policy and allowed more female migration.

Some scholars see women who do unpaid care work as altruistic. I suggest that this case study illustrates the importance of women's care work as an economic element in the generalized reciprocity that one sees in families. If Krishanthi was legally allowed to care for her grandchild while Deepthi returned to the Gulf, both women's care work would have economic value. I argue that no family care work is altruistically "given away for free;" care work involves both the givers and the receivers in reciprocal webs of obligations and responsibility.

### **Cases 3 and 4: Institutions to care for the elderly: The logic and economics of Old Folk's Homes**

In the area of Sri Lanka where I do my fieldwork, there are two kinds of Old Folks' Homes (OFH): paying and not-paying. Community donations support non-paying, charitable organizations. The paying type (which are few and far between and have many fewer beds) offers care for residents who pay a monthly fee or donate all of their property to the institution in exchange for receiving care through the end of their lives.

The two types of institutions carry different valences of class, shame, and stigma. People find it perfectly respectable to hire a servant to look after an elder in the elder's home. They find it morally dubious, however, to move an elder out of the home into a care facility. Some people I interviewed judged moving an elder to a paying institution acceptable under some circumstances (for example, if the children could not take care of the elder or if the elder wished to live in the institution). They also felt that if the family could not afford to take care of the elder, sending them to a non-paying charitable institution might be the best option. The norm, however, remains that children should care for their ageing parents in the family home.

Case 3: When fighting with his family, Martin (my research associate's cantankerous father) often voiced the desire to go to Kalutara OFH for pensioned elders. The family and I perceived Martin's statements as a threat. If Martin chose to live in an OFH, his absence would undermine the family's reputation, particularly that of the son who lived in the family's mahagedera. Despite repeated threats, however, Martin never actually went to Kalutara. His leaving would undermine his own reputation along with that of his family, and he did not wish to leave his home, which he and his wife had built and deeded to their eldest son.

Case 4: A non-paying OFH housed fifteen elders in a village adjacent to Naeagama. Managed by a young couple who did all of the care work for the elders in the home, the institution also received donations from the local community. These gifts, in addition to small amounts of money from the government, enable the institution to function economically. Neighbours and people in the area give alms (in the form of food, clothing, bedsheets, mosquito nets, soap, and medicines) to earn merit for themselves and deceased loved ones.

As I argue elsewhere (Gamburd, 2021), offering an almsgiving is a form of care for deceased relatives. Recipients of alms reciprocate the material offerings with gifts of merit for those providing the offerings and for those whom they designate as recipients (usually the deceased relatives). Earning merit for deceased kin is part of the ongoing family obligations to take care of elders (which stretches beyond the death of their physical body to include continuing care through the next rebirth.)

The community care offered to non-paying OFH operates in the religious realm rather than the market economy and gets remunerated with merit rather than wages. Caring for monks at Buddhist temples and elders at OFH (all of whom lack caregivers in the “sandwich” generation, e.g., daughters-in-law) forms part of the generalized reciprocity through which families continue to take care of their own deceased ancestors. People in Naeagama care for the monks at the local temple and the elderly at the non-paying OFH by giving the institutions what they need for their short-term needs (food, clothing, money for the electricity bill) as well as long-term needs (land, buildings, toilets, parapet walls). They support the life-cycle rituals for the monks (ordination, funerals) and the elders (funerals). The gifts sustain the social reproduction of the temple and the OFH in a material sense while also contributing to the care of deceased elders in a spiritual economy of care and merit.

In my conversations with the couple who runs the local OFH, I learned that they had tried to hire help, but they had failed to find staff willing to handle the excrement of incontinent elders. No one wished to do this sort of low servant work for wages. In homes, people face similar distaste, with competition arising over which woman “gets the smell” from doing difficult care work. The difficulty of the task, however, marked its moral value in the family. Older women talked frequently about having done care work for their own mothers or mothers-in-law, with “keeping them without smell” being the highest form of loving service. In my observation, women tend to do this unpaid work for

other, older, women. Such unpaid “kin work” (Coe and Dossa, 2017) is priceless; institutions find it difficult and expensive to hire workers to do it for a wage.

Is the care work done for monks in homes and elders in OFH “unpaid”? The couple who runs the local OFH did make a living from operating their institution, but in interviews, they portray themselves as “like kin” to their clients. Most of the material donations for temples and OFH, however, came from community members who exchanged alms for merit as part of the generalized reciprocity that governs the obligations of family members to continue their spiritual care for deceased elders.

## Conclusion

Case studies of social reproduction can help broaden the conversation around women’s unpaid labour. Much care work gets done in the family, a realm not governed by wages and market exchange. Instead, people within families exchange goods and services through generalized reciprocity. I have examined the social reproduction of the family on two timescales (short- and long-term). In case 1 (Darshini), I argue that women’s unpaid care work may be “unpaid” but, in Regina’s case, was definitely “repaid.” Based on case 2 (Parakrama and Deepthi), I argue that taking women out of the formal economy and forcing them to work only in the home reduces a family’s ability to reproduce itself. Women need to be able to move fluidly between paid and unpaid work (both of which need clear recognition) in order to sustain families in Naeagama. Based on case 3 (Martin’s threat to leave his home and go to a for-pay OFH) and case 4 (the economy of almsgiving at a local non-paying OFH), I suggest that we need to consider religious doctrine and symbolic exchanges of merit when assessing how repayment for “unpaid” labour can take place. In summary, although women often care without receiving pay, their work is repaid in other ways.

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# Re-thinking Unpaid Care Work from the Periphery: War-torn Northern Sri Lankan Women’s Challenges for Livelihoods and Social Reproduction

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka is mired in the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. The ongoing economic depression is pummeling the social and economic lives of the people, particularly of women in the rural and urban periphery. Amidst the problematic elite consensus in Sri Lanka that the solution to the economic crisis is through the 17th International Monetary Fund (IMF) Agreement, one of IMF’s recommendations to Sri Lanka has been to increase Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP).<sup>1</sup> Scholars who are supportive of this policy push blame cultural factors as the primary reason for the lower percentage of women’s formal participation in the labour force.

Such discourses focus on the abstract individual choices available to working women denied by local cultural discourses about women’s role in the home and workplace. But they ignore the real needs for social protection that would relieve the burden women carry while also providing them space to collectively organize and transform their community life. Furthermore, this liberal framing often ignores the historical fact that working women’s labour in the plantations, in the garment factories, and as migrant workers have been the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy. These liberals say even less about the working conditions and the exploitation women face in

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from IMF Staff Report made public in March 2022: “Reforms to unlock Sri Lanka’s growth potential should focus on promoting female labour force participation, creating job opportunities for the young, reducing trade barriers, and improving investment climate.”

these spaces. Moreover, the cultural argument is combined with the push for legal and policy reforms to enable women to engage in the formal labour force while intentionally failing to highlight and present the complex nature of women's labour and work.

The predicament and double burden of working women where they engage in both work at home and generating cash income for the family is often a neglected topic of discussion. This paper critiques dominant arguments that overcoming cultural inhibitions and legal reforms will resolve the issues of women's labour and work. Based on our three action research projects "Women and Livelihoods in the Northern Province" for the Northern Co-operative Development Bank, "Northern Muslim returnees and their livelihood possibilities through co-operatives" for GIZ, and "Socio-Economic Conditions of Up-Country Origin People in Kilinochchi and Development of Women's Livelihoods through Co-operatives" for a University Research Grant of the University of Jaffna, we explore the predicament of working women in the rural post-war North. We analyse the triple burden faced by working women in the war-torn province, where they struggle as caregivers for dependants, to generate income for their families, and to rebuild their homes destroyed by the war.

## Context

The three decades of civil war in the North and East of Sri Lanka had cost several thousands of human lives and destroyed valuable assets and properties of diverse communities. Many families in the post-war context are struggling to rebuild their households, while the loss of assets and properties has pushed them into an economically vulnerable state.

Lands inhabited in the past by many of these communities in the North are under military occupation as well as taken over by other state institutions. In some cases, the state has provided alternative land elsewhere to certain communities, with no assistance or concern about their social and livelihood possibilities through those lands. For example, returning Northern Muslim communities from Silavathurai town are given land, far away from the town, in areas where they do not have fresh water facilities or rich soil for any home-based production, while the more resource-rich lands are occupied by the Navy, Army and the Police. Furthermore, Northern Muslims, oppressed caste people and other excluded communities face discrimination allegedly by government officials in relation to their land issues. Such systemic



exclusion from land and resources adds pressures on the livelihoods and means of generating home-based production for in-kind and cash incomes.

Post-war development in the North has been a failure, and this paper raises several questions about the flawed national and regional economic policies that have disregarded diverse challenges these war-torn communities face as they try to rebuild their homes and household economy. State support with reconstruction for small-scale producers, daily wage earners, and households of women with dependents was limited. In other words, what did these “reconstruction” and “development” policies mean for women in the North, especially for women who belong to marginalised communities?

In post-war Northern communities, men try to find some income for the family through agricultural production, fisheries, day wage labour, and as migrant workers. Meanwhile, women in these households do not stay idle. With little assistance from the state, women had to make half-built houses into homes. From building fences around their land for safety to taking care of dependents – elders to children – women spend time working in their homes; this female labour creates the necessary space for men to engage in production and labour for cash incomes. Furthermore, in the marginalized communities of the North, as women try to rebuild their homes and make them a space for survival, limited income to the family barely fulfils the financial needs of the household including the provision of food.

## **Methodology**

This paper comes out of action research linked to the co-operative movement in the Northern Province. In the post-war years in the North, and particularly after 2015, the possibility of the co-operatives becoming an alternative to strengthen rural livelihoods including women’s livelihoods has become a subject of discussion. The response to the devastating microfinance indebtedness crisis in the Northern Province led to the expansion of credit co-operatives as a credible alternative for rural credit. In this context, the question of rural livelihoods that are intrinsically linked to rural credit was taken up for research, by some of us as researchers working closely with the co-operative movement. The Central Bank-commissioned Economic Development Framework for a Northern Province Master Plan (2018), which one of the writers of this paper co-authored, provided a broader context for engagement. The formation of the Northern Co-operative Development Bank in

August 2019 led to practical initiatives in relation to co-operatives and livelihoods. However, we were also conscious of the exclusions within the co-operatives, particularly of women and marginalized communities.

This paper examines some of these concerns relating to gender and forms of social exclusions that have emerged, mainly through Focus Group Discussions, interviews, and case studies for a few action research initiatives. Furthermore, this research has also been enriched by fieldwork in relation to rural development through co-operatives. In this way, we see this paper as a work in progress linked to practice and the search for alternatives, while attempting to theoretically understand the role of women's work, livelihoods, and labour.

## **Framing of Social Reproduction**

In our paper we draw extensively from the theorisation of social reproduction by feminist political economists. Women are often pushed to engage in wage labour to meet the economic needs of the family. However, women do not use their entire time for cash income, as their time and labour are split between production and social reproduction. Tamara Jacka defines social reproduction as inclusive of “biological reproduction through childbirth and child-rearing; the reproduction of humans, through socialization and education as well as the provision of food, shelter, and other goods; the maintenance of human wellbeing through the provision of welfare; health care and other services, and through social and cultural activities; and the reproduction of social relations and social institutions” (Jacka, 2018). Limited access to land means limited access to household provisions and resources such as firewood and water. This lack of access to goods and resources pushes women to seek waged labour that would provide them with some cash income to purchase these supplies needed for social reproduction (Rao, 2018).

Even if they have access to small plots of land, women have to engage in waged labour since production from the land is inadequate to generate incomes necessary for sustenance. Increasingly women's participation in waged labour is due to lack of land as a resource and an asset, and men leaving for migrant work elsewhere (Deere, 1995).

## Unwaged Female Labour in Production

As opposed to many claims that women do not engage in labour and production, our research in rural as well as economically marginalized communities in urban areas of northern Sri Lanka shows otherwise. The communities in the North are diverse with complex economic activities, from rural agricultural livelihoods to urban informal services. Furthermore, cash incomes generated for the household – which is often the basis for calculating levels of poverty and economic activity – do not rely on one family member. Limiting one’s understanding to the energies expended as labour for measurable cash income generated by a woman, or for that matter a man, in the family does injustice to the complex realities of the household economy. Indeed, the work of other family members that enable cash income generation is often ignored. These households of working people rely on plurality of incomes generated by women, men, their children and the extended family.

Women from the communities we have engaged with are further marginalised by identities like ethnicity, religion, and caste. Our research has engaged people of Hill Country Tamil origin who have been living in many newly formed villages in Kilinochchi after a series of displacements in the late 1960s to the early 1980s due to pogroms and mass violence in the South. Facing displacement several times during the war, which also led to the loss of material assets and human lives, these families are now slowly trying to rebuild their lives in places they were displaced from and now returned to.

The women from these Hill Country Tamil communities described the process of rebuilding their houses after the war. Some of them had damaged houses while many of them had to build from scratch. The Government had a housing program, which gave them allocations of Rs. 150,000 to repair damaged houses, while those who had to rebuild a house from scratch were initially given a grant of Rs 300,000.<sup>2</sup> However, these funds were insufficient to build their houses and most of them had to borrow money or take loans. In many cases, to reduce the cost of labour for building their houses, both the husband and wife worked as helpers to the masons. Although the husband and wife did not get paid for the labour they exerted in building the house, their labour contributed towards creating a shelter to live in. That is a shelter to reproduce labour necessary for the economic system. Furthermore, women and children replace other forms of labour;

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<sup>2</sup> FGD at Shanthapuram, 23 July 2022

<sup>3</sup> The name of the speaker has been changed, FGD on 23 July 2022

<sup>4</sup> The name of the speaker has been changed, FGD at Shanthapuram 23 July 2022

from fixing the fence to making thatched roofs, and to mixing cement. Although women we spoke to described it as “labour for the family”, there is a crucial need to recognize and value such unpaid labour in production.

The dominant idea of a monetized market economy often fails to recognize women who do not earn a cash income. However, women generate income for the household through sewing, working in garment factories, daily wage work on farms, and ‘supporting’ their men in their income-generating activities like fishing, farming etc. For example, women in Shanthapuram, a village in Kilinochchi predominantly of Hill Country origin people, had the following to say:

“I work with my husband in his mechanic shop helping him instead of hiring someone else. This shop is put in our land with the house so it is easy for me to take care of my children – pick and drop them to school and tuition – cook for the family and spend the spare time helping my husband.” (Jeya,<sup>3</sup> Shanthapuram)

“With the crisis, my husband’s daily wage opportunities have reduced. He now goes to the pond with my brother to catch fish. Sometimes I also go to clean the nets after they come to the shore.” (Thusha,<sup>4</sup> Shanthapuram)

While the labour of the husband, who runs the shop, is exploited with low pay by an unequal economic system, the wife who also expends her labour and time in the shop is not even paid. Similarly, many women, especially from the fishing communities, engage in labour of cleaning the nets so that the fishermen can use them the next day. However, the labour of the wives and daughters of the owners of these nets is often left uncalculated and unpaid while women who sell their labour to mend and fix nets for reuse are left underpaid. The work of these women (and children) is rarely considered as labour time expended for production.

## **Waged Female Labour in Production**

Many women from economically marginalised communities, who are also subjected to social and political forms of discrimination, are often pushed into waged labour to meet the economic needs of the family. Lack of access to land and other resources burdens women with the responsibility to engage in low-wage labour to support the family. Even if they have access to small plots of land, women have to engage in waged labour outside their homes as production in such lands does not allow their households to accumulate assets, and often not enough

for sustenance. Women from oppressed castes, marginalised regions and ethnic identities and the working class are further vulnerable to exploitation. Furthermore, the gendered division of labour in rural manufacturing and craft industries plays a significant role in determining women's wages and work options (Kandeepan et al., 2021).

Women from Northern Muslim communities, for instance, described how they engaged in wage labour after their eviction and in displacement in places like Puttalam. Almost all the families had lost their assets in this act of ethnic cleansing by the LTTE. This situation created economic difficulties requiring women to engage in wage labour. To survive, both men and women had to sell their labour for a daily wage to ensure that they feed themselves to survive. Sometimes men migrated to the towns and cities in search of work while women sought work in coconut farms, as well as onion and agricultural cultivation activities in the locality.

“To speak about livelihood opportunities in Puttalam, most [displaced] Muslims engaged in waged labour. Among them, [Muslim] women engaged in waged labour in large estates to generate income for their families.

To seek income for their families, many women and children had to engage in wage labour in these estates – this created an unfortunate situation where the education of many displaced children got disrupted and they were made to become child labourers. [...] Since mothers go out to work, girls had to take up the household responsibilities. And, since school is far, girls stopped going to schools and became either labourers or those who did domestic work.” (J,<sup>5</sup> Mulliyawalai).

“When we were living in Jaffna, we were children. In my mother's and father's days, there were no factories like it is now. What I saw then was that my mother used to cut arecanut for her livelihood. My father was a tailor. It [the money] was not enough for our education. So mother used to cut arecanut and would ask me to sell them in small shops. I remember giving them to small shops in the local area. After being displaced as refugees, I learned tailoring. It became our livelihood. I was stitching from home.” (R,<sup>6</sup> Jaffna).

<sup>5</sup> The name of the speaker has been made anonymous, Zoom meeting on 6 July 2021.

<sup>6</sup> The name of the speaker has been made anonymous, Zoom conversation on 18 July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> The name of the speaker has been made anonymous, Zoom conversation on 6 July 2021.

These are two different narratives of the Northern Muslim women who lived in Mulliyawalai, Mullaitheevu, and Moor Street, Jaffna. As opposed to many claims that women do not engage in income-generating activities, Northern Muslim women, who were economically vulnerable then and now, here speak of their or their mothers' income-generating livelihoods before and after the eviction. In these narratives, it is crucial to highlight that girls in the family had to take up domestic responsibilities to support their mothers when they went out for work. It has been these girls who took up the burden of caring for and supporting their families. Even after returning to their homes after almost thirty years of displacement, most of the women continue to engage in daily wage work in the locality, while young girls take care of their younger siblings.

“We came back to Mullaitheevu in 2005, but had to return again to Puttalam in 2006. I used to work in the thottam nearby while schooling. We returned to Mullaitheevu recently after my marriage. I work at the preschool nearby now. I have 2 sisters and a brother to take care of along with my two children. My younger brother now goes to work as a mason while I work at the preschool. In my spare time, I stitch clothes and sell them as well to make a living. But that is also seasonal.” (R,<sup>7</sup> Mulliyawalai).

R, as a preschool teacher, gets paid a salary of Rs. 6,000 per month through the Provincial Council. In an economically vulnerable position, she has to take up several cash income-generating activities to feed and educate her younger siblings and her children. Several girls from the community even now have to give up on their education or often miss school to take care of their younger siblings while their parents go out to labour for cash income.

Many other women from the Muslim communities and Hill-Country Tamil communities living in the North mentioned that they earn some cash income by sewing clothes, selling eggs and milk in the neighbourhood, or running small shops. There is a preference amongst these women to engage in such cash-earning activities from their domestic sphere or in the close proximity, within their villages.

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<sup>7</sup> The name of the speaker has been made anonymous, Zoom meeting on 6 July 2021.

“I have a tailoring shop to stitch clothes along with our house. [...] It is me and my daaththa [sister-in-law], who is a widow, who runs this business. [...] My husband gets us the clothes [from Horopaththana] for credit. We stitch the clothes and sell them to pay back the credit. There is no profit as such in this. I have three kids who are schooling, and my widow anni also has two children.” (R,<sup>8</sup> Mulliyawalai).

“I also engage in tailoring activities for income. But I do not get the time to engage in those activities. [...] What I am trying to tell is that we women cannot entirely spend our time in income-generating activities. It is not just funds we lack, but we women spend a lot of time in doing domestic work. Another thing is that Muslim women look for income-generating activities centred around their domestic space. Most of us have the experience of cattle and poultry farming, but here we have only 10 or 20 perches of land which is insufficient to do those work.” (Jensila, Mulliyawalai).

We also met economically marginalised women from Vellantheru and Convent road, located closer to Jaffna town. They engage in distributing home-cooked food for shops, selling peanuts, marketing coconuts or firewood supplied from other districts, or working as daily wage earners in small restaurants. The cash income they generate is sufficient only for their subsistence: to pay for drinking water, to buy essentials necessary to survive and to buy raw materials needed for the next day’s production. Such production by women for cash income, either become the primary income of the family or is used for incidental expenses including for education such as tuition fees for their children.

## Triple burden of women in the war-torn North

Silvia Federici, in her book *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, explores the question of reproduction as the complex of activities and relations by which our life and labour are

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<sup>9</sup> Federici’s political contextualisation of the feminist turn towards reconginising reproductive work in the post-World War II context is significant: “The confrontation with ‘reproductive work’—understood, at first, as housework, domestic labour—was the defining factor for many women of my generation, who came of age in the aftermath of World War II. For after two world wars that in a space of three decades decimated more than seventy million people, the lures of domesticity and the prospect of sacrificing our lives to produce more workers and soldiers for the state had no hold on our imagination.” (Federici 2012, 5)

daily reconstituted (2012). She highlights how women's labour gained importance as reproductive work and domestic work in the aftermath of World War II, where they became conscious of their role as producing workers and soldiers for the state.<sup>9</sup> This political critique is of significance to expand Marx's analysis of labour beyond the factory to the home and housework done by women, not necessarily by "housewives", but by mothers, daughters and sisters in the households. It is important to analyse such unpaid labour and unmask the extent of capitalist exploitation of women's labour by naturalizing gender roles in society.

In this section, we would like to explore the contribution of working class women to the local economy. Here we speak of the triple burden, specifically of women from the war-torn North who had to rebuild their homes, engage in care work in their homes and sell their labour for cash incomes.

In the rural and the urban North, lack of access to land, credit, and other resources push women to engage in low-wage labour to support the family. Resettling in the North after the war, many women had the responsibility of making their destroyed houses into homes; often because their husbands/sons/grandsons were disappeared, disabled, dead, left them behind or migrated to towns and cities to find work. In this context, women had to fight against the occupation of land by the state or encroachers, clean their land, build fences for safety, and rebuild houses to make them eventually their dwellings. To burden them further, the housing schemes, by the state, were insufficient to rebuild destroyed homes – this required financial assistance and human labour, which most of the communities in the North had lost in the war. Therefore, these women had to carry the burden of resettling, which did not come easy, and were pushed into engaging in wage labour for cash income.

In Musali, a region of the Mannar District, women-headed households of the Northern Muslim communities spoke of the tremendous hardship they underwent in accessing housing schemes. Most of the residents had displaced to Puttalam when the Muslim community in the north had been evicted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and only started returning to their homes after the civil war ended in 2009. However, many families often travelled to and from Puttalam and Musali since it was crucial to reclaim their land in Musali while engaging in their cash income-generating activities in Puttalam. Most of the women headed households, often low-income earners, struggled to return to their lands in Musali and access housing schemes because it was required of them to show the Grama Sevakar that they live in their lands to be approved for the housing scheme. As a result, many



women had to build a small hut on their land and reside there while also travelling to Puttalam, whenever they could, to generate some income to sustain life in Musali. Furthermore, if a woman is the only living member in a family, some criteria exclude such women from claiming housing schemes. Such policies in resettlement and seeking state support further burden women who are called to show their eligibility for a scheme while working for the sustenance of their family.

In this context, returning after almost thirty years, most of the lands belonging to Northern Muslims became contested spaces as their land and houses were occupied by Tamils displaced from within the North. There is a need for additional land for these families as they have now expanded, and have members from the second and third generations. While many families do not have sufficient finances to buy new lands, most of them had divided existing lands within the family for their children (Kadirgamar et al., 2021). Adding to the troubles of the Northern Muslim community in Musali, the state's military forces and the forest department have occupied and alienated this community from accessing land and its natural resources. As a result of this occupation of land by the state, women find it difficult to access firewood, pasture for their cattle, and land for agricultural production. Most of the families in Silavathurai town, Musali, have been relocated to land elsewhere, as their land has been occupied by the military. However, the land they are relocated to is a marshland where each family is given less than 17 perches. Residents of Silavathurai mentioned that they cannot grow any plant for consumption purposes on this land, and neither do they have wells for drinking water. As a result, they have to buy vegetables, fruits, and water for money. In the words of one of the women from Silavathurai,

“We have to buy everything for money, from water to food. We do not have a well, even that is brackish water. We get 2-3 pots of water to drink, and can't even bathe in it. We pay Rs. 200 as a compulsory tax, without proper income, but never get water sufficient for the family.<sup>10</sup>”

Next, biologically producing labour and reproducing the labour on a day-to-day basis for the economic system are normalised and naturalised as women's work. Women from diverse backgrounds in the North, emphasised the need to take care of their children, elders or disabled members of the family. Most of the women also highlighted

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<sup>10</sup> FGD at Silavathurai, Musali on 13th October 2021

<sup>11</sup> The name of the speaker has been made anonymous, Zoom meeting on 6 July 2021.

how they cannot engage in waged work because of their children's education needs, including picking and dropping them from school and tuition. This work of women in the domestic realm cannot be limited to cultural reasons, because capitalist economic system exploits women by keeping care work unpaid (Federici, 2012).

Many Northern Muslim women during their displacement and after their resettlement, irrespective of their age, had to give up on their education to stay back at home and take care of their younger siblings.

“We went to Puttalam. There my mother fell sick... she was paralyzed. After that I gave up on my studies. I did not go to school for 3 years. I can study well but could not continue beyond Grade 10 [...] I had to take care of my mother. [...] In 2010, she passed away, and my studies disrupted further because I had younger brothers and sisters to take care. [...] now I have to take care of my father, younger brother and a sister who are schooling. [...] I am married also. I have two children as well.” (T,<sup>11</sup> Mulliyawalai)

While care work has been naturalized as the work of a “housewife,” it is not only “housewives” who engage in care work and reproduce labour, rather all the women in the household contribute towards social reproduction. This “to be a housewife” has been a naturalized process through which the market and the capitalist system exploits women. As Federici argues in her chapter “Wages against Housework,”

“By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone. First of all, it has gotten a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life (the magic words: “Yes, darling, you are a real woman”). At the same time, it has also disciplined the male worker, by making “his” woman dependent on his work and his wage, and trapped him in this discipline by giving him a servant after he himself has done so much serving at the factory or the office. In fact, our role as women is to be the unwaged but happy and most of all loving servants of the “working class,” i.e., those strata of the proletariat to which capital was forced to grant more social power.” (Federici, 2012, 17)

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<sup>12</sup> FDG at Bharathypuram 23 July 2022

When we met women of Hill-Country origin living in Kilinochchi, they spoke of how crucial education is for their children, but they are forced to disrupt their children's education. Tuition class fees have increased, and even the transport costs and price of stationary and school needs have increased with the economic crisis.<sup>12</sup> Most families are forced to cut costs on education only to ensure that they have sufficient money to purchase food for survival. In various other households, mothers are pushed into a position where they have to make a choice of which child stays home from school and which child gets fed. Many others have been sending most of their children to school since students were earlier provided with mid-day meals; however, with that stopped now, most of the mothers were worried for their children's nutrition and health.

Multiple social, political and economic factors play an important role in determining women's access to land and resources which are crucial for social reproduction. When those basic necessities are not met, economically vulnerable women are pushed into participating in waged labour. While her labour is compensated with a wage, that is often lower, her labour in the domestic space as care work and social reproduction is not compensated.

## **Increasing Female Labour Force Participation and Women at the Margins**

As this paper has illustrated above, women's work and labour are already being expended in intensive ways contributing to their families, broader society and the economy. However, the IMF calls for a "focus on promoting female labour force participation, creating job opportunities for the young, reducing trade barriers" (IMF, March 2022). This assertion fails to recognise and value women's domestic and community work. Scholars argue that legal and policy reforms, "investment [...] to shift social norms to help ease the path of working women" and creating job opportunities are significant for increasing female labour force participation (Sri Lanka-Australia: Building Better Networks for Gendered Economic Development, 2021) while less efforts have been taken to understand women's work in domestic space and such work is considered as a problem of social norms. Furthermore, such reforms and opportunities are often mistaken as choices that should be made available for women, as a homogenous group. Here, the error is the delusion that all women are going to benefit from these "choices" made available to them. Meanwhile, lived realities of women in the periphery, who are economically vulnerable, and marginalised in terms of ethnicity, caste, and religion, are ignored, if not actively

excluded from the measures necessary to address their predicament, through the loud clamour of these policies and recommendations made at the center. Rather, it is significant to identify how one's material life is intertwined with social life. The question from our research is to think beyond "economic freedom" and this binary of "choices" of engaging in formal labour and domestic work.

This so-called "choice" to be able to work does not however capture the many failed projects and attempts made by women to engage in labour. For example, in post-war North, local state officials, especially those who are working with rural women, push such women to engage in "entrepreneurial" efforts and attempt to showcase "self-made" stories of those who run a business and can employ other women. These attempts by local officers are further pushed by international donors and their local partners. In other words, there are widespread efforts to legitimise these entrepreneur and self-made narratives to project them as the way forward for rural women.

Local state officials organise training programs and provide in-kind livelihood "assistance" promoting individualised production while failing to recognise the time spent by women to rebuild their homes and engage in care work and social reproduction. Furthermore, pushing women into such isolated, individualised production often results in failure, and the officers again blame the women for not working hard and becoming success stories.

The promotion of FLFP in rural areas is even more problematic due to the character of formal labour activities available, which in fact tend to be extremely exploitative and precarious. Amidst the economic crisis, some women of Hill-Country origin living in Kilinochchi had joined the juice factory next to their village. Describing her labour to us, one of the women had the following to say:

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<sup>13</sup> The name of the speaker has been made anonymous, FDG at Malayalapuram 25 June 2022

“There is no work in the village. But we need money to survive, to eat, to send our children to school. So recently some women, including me, have started to work in a juice factory in the next village. We are supposed to cut mangoes to extract the pulp from the fruit. The factory pays us Rs. 1000 per day and Rs. 200 for every hour of overtime. If we are working a night shift, the factory will provide us with food. However, it is very difficult to work there. From morning till evening, we have to work in an air-conditioned room standing throughout the whole day. When I come back I am exhausted and my body aches from continuous standing.”. (S,<sup>13</sup> Malayalapuram)

Many women spoke also about how they had to wake up early in the morning to cook food for the family and themselves to take to work; for example when they go to work at the garments factory or landmine clearance duty. When they get back home they have to cook dinner. This back-breaking work of women at the garments factory and often dangerous work they engage in clearing the mines are compensated with wages, which is sufficient to survive but does not economically uplift them as they have to continue to work even if their family support system collapses.

Scholars conflate agency with choice as if to suggest that lack of formal labour participation means that women do not have agency. Agency, as Gayatri Spivak argues, in popular understanding is seen as overt actions that are institutionally validated (2013). In this popular understanding, women who are acting to change their current socio-economic situations by not directly being involved in formal production are barely recognised or valued. Women at the margins, as argued above, engage in work and production within their domestic space. While conflating agency with choice, such scholars forget to explore the relationship of women to their production. Women at the margins engaging in home-based production have relative control over what and how much they want to produce. This is counter to labour in a factory where they neither own what they produce nor have control over the conditions in which they produce. For example, when women from Vellantheru in Jaffna town spoke to us about the food they produce to sell for shops, they are simultaneously cooking for their own consumption as well.

## Conclusion: Rethinking women's emancipation through rural alternatives

“We recommend to the working men to embark in co-operative production rather than in co-operative stores. The latter touch but the surface of the present economical system, the former attacks its groundwork.” (Marx, 2000, 90)

“If we also take into account that in medieval society collective relations prevailed over familial ones, and most of the tasks that female serfs performed (washing, spinning, harvesting, and tending to animals on the commons) were done in co-operation with other women, we then realize that the sexual division of labour, far from being a source of isolation, was a source of power and protection for women. It was the basis for an intense female sociality and solidarity that enabled women to stand up to men, despite the fact that the Church preached women's submission to men, and Canonic Law sanctified the husband's right to beat his wife.” (Federici, 2004, 25)

Sri Lanka is in a great time of crisis. The economy is collapsing and those who are employed are losing their jobs and people in the countryside are finding it difficult to feed their families. Rural production and social reproduction are now central concerns for all. But those who are aligned with the neoliberal solutions to the crisis based on export-led growth are promoting the IMF package including its call for FLFP. This is again reflective of how disconnected the debates are from the reality of women's lives, especially of those who are economically vulnerable and socially marginalised.

We began our inquiry into the predicament of women's labour and work from the vantage point of the post-war North. And much like Federici who saw the importance of social reproduction for women who were troubled by the losses of World War II, we hear in the North of those having lost their homes and the triple burden ravaging women's lives; to earn cash incomes outside the home, work for their families inside their homes, and to take on the burden of rebuilding their devastated homes themselves.

In looking at the different ways in which women expend their energies for survival, we want to begin thinking about the distinction between labour and work that Marx makes in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (Fromm, 2013). Work under a capitalist economic system

becomes labour, but in the process, the producer becomes alienated from what she produces. Rather than getting trapped in questions like, are women's care work in the home compensated for as labour, we want to raise fundamental questions about the distinction between labour and work itself. In other words, we want to take the questions of alienation and emancipation seriously. What would women's emancipated work look like if they are not alienated in the processes of production and social reproduction? We believe that answers not just to questions about exploitation, as with our analysis of the triple burden that women face in the post-war North, but ideas about emancipation are also more likely to emerge from marginalised women in the periphery.

Our preoccupation with co-operatives, and the possibilities they engender for alternatives in relation to ideas of women's labour and work, raise questions about women's control over their working conditions and what they produce. The two quotes from the epigraph to this conclusion from Marx and Federici are instructive for us. We begin from the theoretical vantage point of Marx on co-operative production and Federici's critique of Marx's theorisation of primitive accumulation, which forces questions about co-operation of women in medieval society.

Marx made some significant points about co-operatives both in the Inaugural address to the First International and then in subsequent communications including the Gotha Programme. For our purposes here, we refer to Marx's idea of co-operative production by "working men" as attacking the very groundwork of the capitalist system, and as a much greater advance than consumer co-operatives. This relates to the challenge in Northern Sri Lanka today of women's co-operation, which has a strong basis in rural credit co-operatives. However, if women's co-operatives have an emancipatory edge, it needs to take on questions of production and social reproduction seriously in organising women's work.

Federici's historical anomaly of how women's co-operation was a source of power and protection, during the late medieval period, provides the ground to think about women's co-operatives in our times as the basis for not merely providing livelihoods and cash incomes, but to have the potential to transform social relations, through intense forms of "female sociality and solidarity." What we learn from Federici's historical narrative and theorisation is that such solidarity emerges out of women's

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<sup>14</sup> Returning Muslim women in Mulliyawalai, Mullaitivu had initiated the Nisha Development Centre to organise their lives and production, and are now seeking to make it into a co-operative.

social and economic struggles, which is similar to the struggles we have narrated above of women from marginalised communities in the post-war North.

In a time, when the war-affected women of the North are again going through intense suffering with an unprecedented economic crisis, the talk of emancipation might seem a utopian dream. The question may arise as to where can such emancipation begin when the structures of oppression are so entrenched. We draw inspiration from the small community initiatives<sup>14</sup> of women in the periphery, and we echo Paulo Freire about what he had to say about emancipatory education:

“But if the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution? ... One aspect of the reply is to be found in the distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them.” (Freire, 1970, 54)

Even as we grapple with the tremendous crisis before us, it is also time to think about changing the system that has led to the current crisis. And that may well have to begin with women’s initiatives of organising but grounded in an emancipatory vision. Such a vision would have to rethink questions of alienation, labour and work, and ideas of equality, solidarity and freedom.

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# **The Value of Women and Unpaid Care Work in the Plantation Sector**

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## **Introduction**

It is a common phenomenon that women are involved in unpaid care work globally. At the national level, social recognition and economic value have not yet been given or only been minimally given to this work. Moreover, information related to this is not reflected in official national statistics. However, care work, including domestic work, is crucial for the viability of the family structure and for the smooth running of the national economy. Therefore, it is vital to create wider awareness to change this social system and societal perspective.

Since women spend most of their time and physical energy in care work every day, from cooking to house cleaning and fetching water and firewood, they are left with little time to engage in paid work. By virtue of their commitment, the family structure is maintained and the national economy and public social services function properly. Nevertheless, these functions very rarely get recognized as work. According to international research reports, the value of these functions has been estimated to be approximately 10 to 39 percent of the country's total gross domestic product and economy. And owing to the global economic crisis, women's household and care work burden has grown heavier.

Thus, it is indispensable to formulate new laws and policies to offer due economic value to the labour of women who unstintingly provide care work as free services. In addition, regulations should be put in place for providing training to change the perspectives of policymakers. The data generated by collecting and analyzing the time spent on care work in a day and its economic value can be used to substantiate the gendered disparities and gaps related to unpaid care work scientifically.

Since the labour of women engaged in unpaid care work is a women's right, there is a need to emphasize the need for national-level recognition and acceptance by all. The list of care work and household chores that women perform from early morning to bedtime is long. This includes cleaning and cutting vegetables, cooking, washing dishes, washing clothes, cleaning the house and caring work such as bathing, giving pills, feeding, and cleaning the bed for children and other family members who need special care, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities and the sick. Women engage in a number of tasks as free services, including treating guests. They incessantly provide an indirect contribution to the family and national economy of the country due to their hard work. The labour of these women is invisible as they engage in various types of work tirelessly. The cost of this labour should be calculated economically. Also, the exclusion of related information in national statistics has created huge challenges in ensuring women's rights.

In addition to the above care work, women go outside their residences to engage in paid work, and after finishing the work, they return home and take care of all the above family members in the evening and night. Aside from that, they also engage in activities related to community development voluntarily. For example, they participate in community activities including festivals, special events, weddings, funerals, public meetings, and political gatherings and engage in various work at no cost. This includes mobilizing people for public meetings or public events, cleaning the hall, carrying out other preparation tasks, making tea, serving food, serving food and related work, report writing, and preparing expenditure reports.

Furthermore, the various tasks performed by women when social events take place include treating their relatives during wedding ceremonies, preparing tea in the morning, evening and at required times, washing the utensils used for it, preparing special varieties of food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and preparing snacks, washing used cooking utensils, cleaning the kitchen and house in the morning and evening, cleaning the yard, fetching water for cooking, taking long walks from home to wash clothes and drying them, then collecting and folding them, making the beds, washing window and door panels, cleaning and washing of floor mats, making advance arrangements for the preparation of varieties of sweets (Palakaaram), before and after making these special sweets, washing and cleaning the used utensils and distributing them to the guests.

When considering the above tasks, women engage in different types of roles. They are 1. Reproductive 2. Productive, and 3. Community. These household tasks are delivered to all family members starting from the mother, wife or sister in the family in a day. It is expected in society that women should perform all these tasks as their duties and responsibilities to keep the family healthy.

Nevertheless, when a man is generally asked whether his wife or mother is working the answer is they do not work. She is at home. She is a housewife. In today's society, the gendered thinking or perspective is that all women except those who engage in paid work are generally considered unemployed. Thus, the significance of this unpaid work and its economic value is invisible. The lack of scientific analysis of this matter is detrimental to individual, family, social and national development. Hence, the needs of women should be properly identified and assessed while planning development programmes at the national level. For example, special services for maternity and lactating mothers, mother-child welfare, basic health facilities, a dignified working environment, potable water for homes, and toilet and washroom facilities. Infrastructural facilities for a child care centre should include the systematic provision of essential services like water, latrines, play equipment, playgrounds, trained staff and basic sanitation facilities.

## **Submission Statement**

Based on the objectives of the study titled “The contribution of the plantation sector women in care work and challenges faced by them” of Women and Media Collective, an opportunity was provided to the Working Women's Front to conduct a study on “The value of women and unpaid care work in the plantation sector”. The survey was conducted among 20 people in the districts of Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya districts. Therein, we are obliged to thank Ms Balambika, the President of the Working Women's Front, Ms Bhavani, the Treasurer and Ms R. Shanmugadeepa, J. Kirushanthini and A. Janani, the head of branches, and all the respondents who provided further information. Furthermore, on behalf of the organization, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Women and Media Collective for providing us with this unique opportunity. We would also like to express our special gratitude to Mr Muthulingam, Executive Director of the Institute of Social Development, for sharing his valuable perspectives and experiences and for permitting our team to conduct this study.

## **Introduction and Historical Background:**

The inception of tea production: Tea is the second most consumed beverage in the world after water. Tea is also considered a medicinal drink. Sri Lanka has the legacy of a long tea manufacturing tradition. Notably, as a country that produces and distributes quality tea to the world, tea production in Sri Lanka is achieved through the workers' hard work. The industry is comprehended as significant, with a history of about 200 years, providing stable income to our country. The British started tea plantations in Sri Lanka from 1823 to 1941. Tea production began when workers were gradually brought from South India to cultivate coffee, tea, and rubber in mountainous areas and to work in urban areas. It is the descendants of these plantation labourers who today carry the identity of plantation people or people of Indian origin or hill people.

Plantation Management Systems: The tea industry, which was managed by the British, was nationalized in 1970. After nationalization, most tea estates are managed by the Janatha Estates Development Board (JEDB) and Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation (SSPC). Nevertheless, most of these plantations are running at a loss, according to estate management. Consequently, many plantations can be seen abandoned today. Accordingly, tea plantations are not properly maintained. As a result, working days have been reduced to three or four days a week, and the number of factory workers has also been reduced.

Furthermore, workers are paid low wages, and Employee Provident Fund, Employee Trust Fund, gratuity allowance, and annual bonus are curtailed. Welfare services have been abandoned. Remarkably, several childcare centres have been closed. Some are functioning with very limited services and resources. There is a lack of coordination with the National Child Development Services. The Child Development Officer in charge of the centre is paid a low salary. Moreover, only women are appointed to this position. Even though they have completed the Preschool/Primary Education Diploma and Child Development Diploma, special professional studies with appropriate educational qualifications, and have more than five or ten years of professional experience, most still earn less than LKR 10,000. This is a serious violation of labour rights. Their families experience the brunt of constant poverty. A huge responsibility is placed on women to cope with this economic burden.

As a result of these adverse conditions, the workers' living standards and social security have declined. The poverty level in their families has increased, and poverty is seen as an enduring problem. Women have

been burdened with the responsibilities of coping with such economic crises. On the whole, they are unable to meet even their basic needs. Consequently, they have suffered psychologically and physically as well.

In this background, it is notable that following the privatization of the plantation sector, the labour force in the sector has fallen significantly. Since 1992, around 421 plantations have been managed by 21 Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs). In 1992, the total number of workers employed in RPC and government-managed plantations was 357,254. In 2017, the number of these workers decreased to 152,478. As far as the plantation community is concerned, the existence of a labour force is seen as one of its common characteristics. More than 54% of this workforce is women. Despite many protests for living wages for plantation workers, their daily wages have not increased above LKR 1000. Many workers have left the plantations in search of employment due to a lack of wages for their labour and employment opportunities.

As a result of their very low or no income, the poverty level has increased in families. They struggle with various food shortages among children, where they have one meal a day and school dropouts. Consequently, women are forced to leave the plantation industry and work in urban areas. Accordingly, the workload of women has doubled. They wake up at 4 am to attend to household chores. After finishing their productive engagement, they return home and continue to do unpaid care work and household chores till 11 pm. Most of them go to bed after 11 pm.

Further to these tasks, women work untiringly for the family, even on Sundays and other public holidays, by collecting firewood, working in vegetable gardens, and commuting to and from the city for household needs. They are also involved in social activities. For instance, organising and attending meetings, joining in ‘Shramadan’ cleaning campaigns, taking part in weddings and funerals after carrying out related pre-arrangement tasks. Due to the heavy workload on women, they become malnourished and stressed and fall sick quickly. Since there is a lack of awareness that “care work is not for women only”, the opportunities to reduce the workload of women are very limited.

**Institutional, Non-Institutional and Informal Women Workers and Labour Rights:** More than half of the workers in the tea industry are women. Their labour is unacceptably exploited. Particularly, women workers employed in tea factories are denied many labour rights during night shifts. For example, when women engage in the night shift, a female supervisor should be appointed at the factory site, restroom facilities should be available, and overtime payment should be paid

to female workers. They cannot be forced to work the night, and they should be given transportation facilities to reach home after working till late at night or early in the morning. These basic labour rights are not fulfilled.

Besides, the tea pluckers are not treated with dignity, are not provided fair pay for their labour, and there is a lack of social recognition in the industry. Consequently, like their parents, the young men and women migrate from the plantations to work as informal workers in various other private industries, including shops and garment factories.

Even though they have been legally assured of labour rights by the Shop and Office Employees' Act of 1954 and Factory Ordinance, in practice, the employers violate many labour rights guaranteed by these labour laws. For example, maternity leave, gratuity pay, annual bonuses, severance pay. Workers in garment factories in particular are denied the right to form trade unions.

Furthermore, many people from the plantation communities are employed as informal workers, such as domestic workers, migrant workers, seasonal workers and home-based workers attached to various industries for very low wages. They have not been assured their labour rights by law nationally to date. As a result, employers violate the labour rights of these workers.

Their labour is badly exploited. Even though all the female workers in the above sector possess long professional experience, it are not considered a qualification. Due to their lack of paper qualifications, their employers consider them unskilled or semi-skilled labours. Furthermore, they are treated as cheap labour. Consequently, they are not promoted, and wages are not commensurate with their work. So even if they work more than eight hours, they are paid less. This is an injustice done to women workers.

Estate Settlements: 90% of the population still lives in the 10-foot line rooms built by the British over 150 years ago. Currently, 82.9% of the country's total population lives in their own houses. Nevertheless, 90% of the plantation workers are landless without their own houses. The demand for own housing for plantation workers has been raised in the political arena for the past three decades. Nonetheless, this problem remains unsolved to date.



Particularly, around 65% (160,000) of the houses in which most of the workers in tea production live are primitive line dwellings, or terraced houses and temporary cottages i.e., houses with a floor area of 10 to 12 square feet. These dwellings are very small, with very little ventilation and natural light. These houses are considered dark rooms as the windows are made of wood. The floors are soggy, smoky and unhygienic, with 2 or 3 families living in a small room. Women suffer countless hardships due to lack of access to water and drainage. Hygienic systems are not in order. These line houses have open drains running outside them, creating a vulnerable situation threatening the spread of infectious diseases. Women are heavily affected by this.

Moreover, it is usual for around 10 or 20 families to lay common water pipes. Each house does not have separate toilet facilities. Even though common latrines are set up, they are not cleaned properly.

**Right to Vote and the Plantation Communities:** The British introduced universal suffrage to Sri Lanka in the 1930s. However, after independence in 1948, Sinhalese leaders denied citizenship to certain sections of the plantation communities in the same year. Finally, with the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003, citizenship was legally granted to the plantation people. All the Indian Tamils who were then stateless without citizenship became citizens of the country.

Although it is a positive change for them to get civic rights, politicians have used them as a mere vote bank in every successive election. In contrast, structures enabling direct participation in politics and obtaining government services and development projects have not been created. The labour community living in the plantation sector has historically been marginalized from the national mainstream and faces structural exclusion, and has been marginalized from other communities. Since 1975, estate schools have been brought under the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, the government has closed down most of the estate schools instead of developing them. Furthermore, alternative education systems were not presented to these students. These factors contributed to the educational backwardness of the society.

**Services from Local Authorities for Plantation Communities:** The Local Government Act No. 15 of 1987 was introduced in this background. However, under Section 33 of the Act, the services of the authorities were hindered from reaching the estate settlements. People were neglected in getting services from local councils. However, as a result of continuous advocacy and lobbying carried out by the Institute

of Social Development in Kandy since 1994, this prohibition was removed through the 30th Amendment Act of the Local Government in 2018. Accordingly, the dwellers of plantation communities received the opportunity to benefit fully from all the development projects of local councils.

Currently, development projects can be carried out without hindrance with the funds allocated to the representatives elected to local councils. At the same time, the plantation communities are also able to request that the members of their respective councils carry out development projects in their estates with the funds allocated to them. This amendment is a milestone in the history of our plantation communities. It is evident that this amendment will bring remedies to many of the problems mentioned above faced by women, and there will be ample opportunities to obtain many public services, including provisions to reduce the workload of women, which will be an opportunity for the development of plantation communities. For instance, many services can be mentioned, including health services for pregnant women, the establishment of child care centres, prevention of the spread of diseases, construction and maintenance of public latrines, waste disposal, road development – paving and maintenance, fixing street lights, construction of public water drains – maintenance, prevention of water-related diseases, protection of wetlands. The significant fact to emphasize is that the representatives who are elected to the Pradeshiya Sabha should create awareness among plantation communities in this regard.

As far as the estate (plantation) people are concerned, they have limited opportunities to directly benefit or participate in the local councils operating under the direct purview of the central government. And as a result of long-standing discrimination, such as statelessness or incomplete citizenship, these people were excluded from the national mainstream. Consequently, government services and development projects are not legally provided to the estate people. As a result of this, the plantation communities have seen a setback in social development – adversely affecting women’s political, economic and social advancement.

Corona Pandemic: In addition, the Corona pandemic has caused a massive decline in all sectors, and due to the continuous economic meltdown and political instability in the country in the recent past, many of those who worked in plantations have lost their jobs. And the working days of workers have been reduced. In this regard, workers who have returned home after serving in cities expect when they can

return to work. Nevertheless, there is rarely a chance to return to work as businesses and factories hit by the coronavirus have strategically started to downsize their workforces, understanding that their economies may take a few years to rebuild. As a result, many young men and women from the plantations will have to stay at home without work for a few years.

Those who have previously managed their personal needs through their income are now forced to stay home depending on those who earn an income. Often, men can go to nearby towns or villages and engage in physical labour to meet their needs to some extent. However, women rarely get this opportunity. Young plantation women are mostly employed in garment factories and small and large shops. They find it difficult to go to nearby villages and engage in physical labour. Managing these heavy family economic (burdens) is the biggest challenge for women. However, it is a bitter truth that neither the government nor the plantation management has given any special allowances or special privileges to the women pluckers who continued to work even during the corona epidemic period.

## **Research Objective:**

Women workers are absorbed significantly in all industries at the national level and in South Asian countries in the recent contemporary world. It is a positive fact that they gain an income for their labour through this. Yet, in the labour market, women are not paid according to their labour. Their labour is badly exploited. As a result, poverty continues to be an enduring problem in their families.

In addition, many of these women are also engaged in unpaid care work at home i.e., work delivered free of charge for all family members from morning till night. For instance, women are forced to do all the household chores like cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the house, fetching water-firewood, preparing food and washing clothes for all the family members, including caring for children, the elderly, people with disabilities and the sick.

As a result of the deep-rooted conservative gendered social perspectives, practices and the beliefs that ‘women’s major role and responsibility are to engage in household chores’, women engage in reproductive and related work with a service mindset despite the development of literacy, technology and science in recent times. Due to this relentless work and poverty, women are severely affected physically and mentally.

Moreover, reducing gender gaps in the labour market nationally and internationally is a massive challenge. Further, the infrastructure at the workplace is archaic. Gender discrimination, lack of a dignified working environment, health facilities, and special needs of pregnant and lactating mothers are overlooked. It is, therefore, indispensable to identify and implement effective strategies to reduce gender gaps. When we observe Sri Lanka's plantation labour community, in this context, we can identify that women contribute 51% of tea production and young women are engaged in garment factories, shops and industries. It can be observed that women who work outside of their homes in this manner are fully involved in family care work as well. They contribute significantly to their families and the national revenue of the country. If these women fail to engage in the endless care work that are their daily duties, national economic activities will suffer greatly. (The world will stop moving.)

However, this contribution of women is not calculated in any statistics. Plantation women earn 13% of inward forex remittances through tea production. When including the monetary value of their unpaid care work, plantation women contribute a considerable share of the national revenue. The plantation women who go to work at half past six in the morning wake up at four in the morning to engage in the care work required by the family and attend paid work only after completing all the care work. After returning home from the estate work at 4:30 pm, they again engage in care work till evening and night and go to bed at 11 pm. This study aims to identify the challenges faced by plantation women who engage in care work and the measures taken to address them. There is a lack of national data to measure and recognize the value of care work. Adequate research and microeconomic and macroeconomic analyses should be conducted to address this knowledge gap. Furthermore, a new policy on care work and the gender gap should be developed. Policies aimed at addressing the unequal burden of care work on women and girls and their impact should be assessed appropriately.

How can we reduce unreasonable care work burdens on women and girls? This can be achieved by allocating funds for public infrastructure, family welfare services, economic independence, security of women, right to education, equal access to employment, social security policies and gender equality and designing projects on empowering women to obtain professions with authority. The special needs of women-headed families, women suffering from serious diseases, women with disability, women who have lost their husbands, and daily wage earners should be recognised and appropriate programmes to address these needs initiated through national policies.

Women are fully involved in reproductive roles and related tasks. Working women are given maternity leave and an allowance after childbirth. However, most of the women are not given employment during the maternity period considering the welfare of the mother and child. For instance, women engaged in tea plucking work for more than eight hours a day, carrying heavy loads on rough paths, climbing and descending hills in conditions such as heavy rains, hot sun or cold winds. Nevertheless, they are not paid according to their labour. Antenatal and postpartum care should be provided, including mother-child care and welfare. Paternity leave is not granted to men. And plantation communities are excluded from special maternity facilities and national medical services. Estate hospitals should be taken into the national health system. Investments and financial allocations required for upgrading them to the national level should be planned.

Economists have long neglected the fact that women do all household-related chores without pay with a service mentality. Traditionally, care work has been considered women's work. A woman is compelled to perform countless tasks with dedication for the welfare of loved ones based on the relationship systems of mother, wife and sister. The value of this labour is not calculated in the book of national revenue. For every hour a woman spends on unpaid care and household chores, she loses the opportunity to engage in productive employment and to contribute actively or creatively to productive work. Furthermore, she misses the opportunity to invest in her educational endeavours and career upward mobility or for her promotion. These national reports indicate that women account for most of the economically inactive population.

## **Research Methodology:**

This study titled “The Value of Women and Unpaid Care Work in the Plantation Sector” used primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from women workers selected from the Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya districts of the Central Province. The study was carried out in areas under the government management of the Janatha Estate Development Board and the Sri Lankan State Plantations and areas managed by the private sector Regional Plantation Company. In April, May and June 2022, individual interviews, focus group discussions and online discussions were conducted. Remarkably, a special discussion was held with around 20 selected individuals. The study included tea plantation workers and those who lived on the plantation but worked outside the plantation and engaged in unpaid care work. Notably, the actual names of the participants in this study have been changed.

## **Limitations of the Research Report:**

Regrettably, the political and economic conditions of the country deteriorated critically after the study “The Value of Women and Unpaid Care Work in the Plantation Sector ‘ ’ was started. People took to the streets to protest and raise slogans against the government: demanding a change in leadership – ‘Gota Go Home, Maina Go Home’, the abolishment of family rule, and a reduction in prices of essential and other commodities, and. The country’s situation was not smoother as the youth, young women and all the public were taking to the streets and holding demonstrations with many demands, including “recovery of stolen money and property from the public and the country”. Thus, the plantation communities are also psychologically affected by the skyrocketing prices of goods against their low salaries. They have also faced challenges such as waiting in long queues to buy essential commodities and many other commodities, including gas and kerosene.

They could not even buy goods on loan from shops for urgent needs. It was a critical challenge to conduct this study amid situations where sometimes, when purchasing products like wheat flour, dhal and milk powder, the shop owners inform the customers that the products are not for sale in the shops. However, information on socio-economic and political conditions was obtained through interviews and online discussions with the researchers based on their field experience. It is commendable that the terms of the study were adhered to by the researchers throughout the study.

## **Conclusions:**

- The study on the participation of plantation women in unpaid care work revealed that women workers living in government and privately managed plantations work hard though they are not paid for their labour. In other words, their labour is exploited, and poverty is exacerbated.
- These women spend many hours in household chores and care work on behalf of all the family members at home. Nonetheless, this labour is not given any economic value or social recognition.
- The women are compelled to perform duties and responsibilities with triple roles: reproductive and related work, productive work (paid work) and social work.

- Care work performed by plantation women and related information are not calculated in the national labour statistics.
- Owing to the fact that the plantation communities face discrimination in obtaining government services, there has been no satisfactory progress in the development of these communities, in the socio-political and economic spheres.
- Exclusion of children, adults, the elderly and people with disability from national or state services, in particular, is a serious violation of human rights.
- As a result of non-assured housing and land ownership, plantation women are hindered from earning additional income. Furthermore, a dignified, healthy, and quality life is not guaranteed.
- The ancient trade union laws in force should be amended considering the present needs of working women. And new laws should be made. For instance, the ratification of Convention 190 and maternity leave and allowance as provided for the first childbirth are not granted during the second and third childbirths is a major drawback.
- The gender wage gap continues – work, working hours and wages are not provided equitably.
- New policy development is needed on care work and the gender gap. Policies should be implemented to eliminate the unequal burden of care work on women and girls and appropriate assessments of their impact.
- Generally, estate hospitals are not upgraded to the level of national hospitals. For example, the quality of services, medical equipment, types of drugs, team of doctors and infrastructure is not up to standard.
- Currently, national data recognizing and measuring the extent and value of care work is lacking. Adequate research and microeconomic and macroeconomic analyses should be conducted to address this knowledge gap.
- Reduction of unreasonable care work burdens on women and girls could be achieved by allocating funds for public infrastructure, family welfare services, women's economic independence, security of women, right to education, equal access to employment, social security policies and gender equality and by designing projects on empowering women to obtain professions with authority.

- Appropriate programmes should be developed, as part of national policy, considering the special needs of women-headed families, women suffering from serious diseases, women with disabilities, women who have lost their husbands, and daily wage earners.

## **Recommendations:**

- Unpaid care work should be given an economic value.
- Information on unpaid care work should be calculated and reflected in national statistical reports.
- New policies, laws, and regulations should be formulated considering the present circumstances.
- The needs of people with disabilities should be identified appropriately. Correspondingly, the provision of human resources, hospital buildings, physical resources, medical equipment and medicines should be increased as per requirement. Services should be upgraded.
- The needs of the elderly should be upgraded appropriately.
- Government services should be upgraded on a concessional basis for people living below the poverty line or in poverty.
- Children's rights should be protected in a dignified and meaningful manner.
- Plantation communities should be considered and included in financial allocations, resource allocation, government services and national development programmes.
- House ownership and land ownership should be legally guaranteed. Women labourers are the main contributors to the payment of housing loans provided to plantation dwellers. Therefore, when issuing housing title deeds should be given to women.
- Awareness should be created among the officers in charge of the Women and Children Division, Senior Citizens, and Special Needs Divisions attached to the Divisional Secretariat regarding national recognition and economic value of women's workload, unpaid care work and domestic work.
- Awareness of the entitlement of plantation communities to obtain services from local authorities should be created among local councillors.



- National public health and mother-child welfare services should be extended to plantation areas.

Evidence - List of Annexes: The following examples are annexed as evidence of data collected from three districts for conducting a study on “The Value of Women and Unpaid Care Work in the Plantation Sector”.

1. Case Studies (District based)
2. A timetable: Time spent on work from 5 am to 10 pm in a day
3. “The Value of Women and Unpaid Care Work in the Plantation Sector”, basic information of the respondents who are part of the study.
4. Opinions and details received from individual conversations, one-on-one group discussions, and online discussions

## **Case Study 1: Evidence: Ms Paramla - Nuwara Eliya District**

Introduction: Ms Parimala is 33 years old and a mother of two daughters. She is a resident of the Hethersett area in the Nuwara Eliya District, which the Udapussellawa Company administers. She has studied up to G.C.E (O/L) and has completed courses such as the Preschool/Primary Education Diploma and Child Development Diploma. There are six people, including children, in her family. Her husband works in a hotel. Their eldest daughter is 8 years old and studying in Grade 3. The youngest daughter is 3 years old. She goes to preschool. The lady’s aunt is 80 years old. She has been suffering from paraplegia for 23 years, and she cannot walk. Furthermore, her 75-year-old uncle is debilitated due to his old age. Hence, she does daily household chores and takes care of 5 family members, including their maintenance work.

Paid profession: She has been working as a Childcare Development Officer in the area for the past nine years. She is paid LKR 5000 to 7000 as her monthly salary. LKR 500 per child is how the salary is calculated. Some of the parents in this estate enrol their children in preschools in the city; hence, the number of children joining the preschool in the estate is less than 10. Thus, only LKR 5000 is collected from them. She has been working as a Childcare Development Officer for the past 3 years. Nevertheless, instead of appointing her as a permanent employee, the plantation management has given her a temporary position, and her labour with long professional experience is badly exploited. Although

she has written two letters to the estate management demanding a permanent appointment, they have not given any formal reply. When she verbally checked the status of her demand with the manager, his reply was merely, “We will see.”

**Domestic problems:** Their house is located in a line housing scheme. They live in a small house with 3 rooms. However, this line housing scheme has been affected by landslides. Her house is also in danger due to a land erosion. Even though the Nuwara Eliya District Disaster Management Center was informed in this regard, there was no response. The plantation management also did not take any action despite the fact that they were informed. She stated that she lives in this house with the fear for her life. They receive no assistance from the government. They also do not have sufficient money to build a house elsewhere. Therefore, she lives in this house despite the risk.

**Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic:** Ms. Paramala fell into a lot of trouble during the time of the pandemic since the pre-school was closed and there was no income. The tourism industry was badly affected, and hotels were left with no guests. As a result, her husband’s employment was affected, and they struggled a lot, even for food. At that time, her husband joined an agricultural field at Koorawatta as a labourer for a daily wage of LKR1500, and they survived. She said she could not even work for a daily wage as there was no one to care for his children and aunt.

Unpaid care work, household chores	Neuk;
To cook in the morning and night	Morning and evening, 60 minutes
Washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen	Morning and evening, 40 minutes
To clean the yard of her house, to maintain the house	Morning and evening, 15 minutes
Caring for the elderly; her aunt is a paraplegic, therefore she has to do her chores	180 minutes from morning 6 am to evening 8 pm;
Childcare (own), to take care of her two children	280 minutes from morning 6 am to evening 9 pm
Purchasing household items (It takes her 6 kilometres to go from town to city. If she goes by a three-wheeler, it costs 500 rupees. If there are no vehicles, she has to walk to buy commodities.)	90 minutes
Paid work outside her home as a child development officer	480 minutes
Home gardening/home farming collectively by family members – They have a small vegetable garden. During her holidays, she spends time in the garden engaging in weeding, watering, and planting saplings.	200 minutes
Hobbies (Listening to music and watching dramas)	60 minutes
Participating in village groups – while performing household chores and taking part in meetings due to her interest in social work.	60 minutes
Visiting neighbours/relatives/friends – Visiting relative's house on special occasions	90 minutes
Washing/bathing	30 minutes
Visiting dispensaries (for her or family members)	90 minutes
Washing her own and others' clothes and bodies	40 minutes
Engaging in spiritual activities	15 minutes
Helping children with school exercises (homework), teaching lessons to her children.	10 minutes

## Basic details of respondents from Nuwara Eliya district in the study of unpaid care work

	Name	Age	Children			Educational Qualification
			Male	Female	Total	
<b>Herthershed Diviosn – Kandapola - Udapussellawa Plantation</b>						
1	Ms D. Parimala	33	2		2	G.C.E (A/L)  Preschool/Primary education diploma, Diploma in Child development
<b>Brookside Lower division - Brooksrage Plantation private limited</b>						
2	Ms Seethalakshmi	38	2	1	3	Grade 8
3	Ms V. Pushpa	50	2	2	4	Grade 3
<b>Goatfell Division, Kandapola - Mathurata Plantation</b>						
4	Ms S. Puvaneshwari	46	1	1	2	Grade 5
5	Ms Amarawathi	37	2	1	3	G.C.E. (O/L)

**Hours a day spent on unpaid care, housework, and for whom?**

**Details of paid work**

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**Hours Spent**

Her 80-year-old aunt has been suffering from paraplegia for the past 23 years.

75-year-old uncle is debilitated due to age. Therefore, she engages in household chores and takes care of 5 family members, including care work for both.

She cares for her 76-year-old mother, who is in poor health due to her old age, and her 9-year-old daughter with a disability.

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19-year-old, her third daughter has epilepsy. At the age of 4, her daughter could not walk due to an injury she suffered from falling into the stove.

And she does household chores and care work for 6 family members single-handedly.

Her 75-year-old mother has been bed-ridden over the past 6 months as she suffers from paraplegia

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Her husband serves in a shop in Colombo. He comes home once in three months.

So she does all the care and household work of their 3 children for about 8.5 hours a day alone.

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She has worked as a childcare development officer for the past 9 years. She works around 10 hours a day. Her salary is Rs. 5000-7000.

She works as a labourer in a tea estate and works around 10 hours for her wage.

But her salary is Rs XXX. She is not paid according to his labour, and his labour is badly exploited.

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She is a worker in a tea estate and works around ten and a half hours for her wage.

She is a worker in a tea estate and works around ten and a half hours for her wage.

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She is a worker in a tea estate and works around 9 hours for her wage.

## **Case Study 2: Ms Jeyanthi - Gammaduwa Division – Matale District**

**Introduction:** Ms Jayanthi is 27 years old and a resident of Gammaduwa, Matale District. She works as a domestic worker in the nearby towns of Raththota and Matale. Her husband died of a heart attack two years ago. They have two children. The eldest son is 10 years old, and the second, her daughter is three years old.

**Unpaid care work:** Ms Jayanthi has worked as a domestic worker in nearby towns for a daily wage of LKR 600. In Sarojadevi's life, after the birth of her first son, she took a loan of LKR 100,000 from an organization called Brac Sri Lanka which offers loan facilities. Owing to the problem of repaying the loan and the poverty level at home, they had to borrow from many other places to settle the loan. Due to these problems faced in 2017, Saroja decided that seeking work abroad is the best way to eliminate the debt trap and planned to leave the country. He also received 24 days of training before flying abroad. She decided to leave her child in the care of her husband. Due to this, her husband also given up his business in Polonnaruwa and took up employment available in his town.

On this occasion, when Saroja decided to go abroad, she became pregnant for the second time. Consequently, she was unable to go abroad. Furthermore, her husband also gave up his business, which made them more impoverished. After Saroja gave birth to her second child, she and her husband resumed living as day labourers. When debts chase them constantly, Saroja's husband died of a heart attack just a year after the birth of their second child.

### **Paid professions and unpaid care work**

After the death of Jayanthi's husband, Ambanganga Korala Divisional Secretariat provided LKR 10,000 to her. She set up a canteen in the school in the town where he lives using the money she received. Her income was insufficient for her children's education and food needs. Therefore, Saroja started working in the garment industry to increase her income. The labour of women in this industry is very badly exploited.

Jayanthi, who chose this profession, has to get up early every morning at 4.00 am. After preparing breakfast and lunch for her children, she wakes her son and prepares him for school, hands over the second child to his father and goes to work in her garment factory bus at 5.50 am.

She finishes work in the garment factory around 3.40 pm and reaches home by 7.45 pm. Upon her return from work, she will do all her household chores, such as preparing dinner for the children. Following it will be 11.00 pm by the time she goes to bed. Saroja, who worked in the garment factory for 8 consecutive months, was later suspended. She had to take three days off due to her child's sickness. Consequently, Saroja was suspended from the garment factory. After that, she engaged in garden clearing work on the land belonging to a shop named Raththoota Krishna for more than a month for a wage of LKR 800. Since then, she is currently working as a housekeeper in a house in Mandandawala, Matale, for a wage of LKR 800.00. Eleven people live in the house where she works as a housekeeper, and she has to do all the household chores herself.

Jayanti leaves for work at 7.00 am, returns at 3.30 pm and reaches home by 5.40. Owing to the economic impact faced by the country, prices of all types of goods have increased. The transport fares have also been doubled. It costs LKR 115 to travel from home to work; therefore, she has to spend LKR 230 for daily transportation. She has faced the dilemma of having to fulfil her other daily needs using the remaining money. She continues her life as a domestic worker and does not get any support from her mother's or husband's houses. One-and-a-half months after the death of her husband, she applied for the Samurdhi programme and received membership as a Samurdhi beneficiary only a month ago. She received LKR 1500 as her Samurdhi membership fee. Jayanthi's life struggle as a domestic worker with two children continues even today. She intends to provide the best education for her two children.

## **Case Study 3: Ms Sumathi - Appar Tunali – Galaha – Kandy District**

**Introduction:** Ms Sumathi takes care of her 17-year-old daughter, who was born with disabilities, and her 70-year-old uncle, who has been suffering from paraplegia for the past seven years, from 4.30 am to 11.00 pm for about fourteen and a half hours a day without rest. She is unable to engage in a productive role due to her workload. And she finds no time for entertainment.

### **Paid professions and unpaid care work**

Ms Sumathi is 34 years old and a resident of Galaha, Tunali Subdivision. She is educated up to G.C.E Ordinary Level and a mother of five children. Her husband works as a mason and is suffering from kidney disease. However, he was unemployed at home during the coronavirus outbreak in the country. Later he worked in a vegetable shop in Galaha, earning a wage of LKR 500 per day.

Tunali Upper Division is a tea estate managed by the Janatha Estates Development Board (JEDB) for the last 10 years. Later it was abandoned by this administration. Consequently, the workers in these plantations lost their jobs. Currently, they are daily wage earners who do casual jobs and earn less than LKR 500 a day.

Her uncle and aunt renovated the house by taking the Employees' Provident Fund and Employees' Trust Fund, which they accumulated while working in the tea estate. Thus, they enlarged the line rooms, which had very basic facilities.

The availability of government services to the division is very limited. That implies that the Grama Niladhari, including divisional secretariat officials, do not visit the area. There is a government hospital located in Galaha. Nevertheless, the quality of services is sub-standard in terms of facilities such as medical equipment, medicines and doctors. There is no public bus transportation facility from Tunali Estate to the nearby small town of Galaha. Therefore, currently, one has to pay LKR 600 for a three-wheeler to travel to Galaha. Patients have to travel to Kandy Hospital with great difficulty to obtain medical services. The 17-year-old daughter was taken to the Kandy District General Hospital for medical services. However, the doctors informed them that they could not cure her.



# Gendered Citizenship: Exploring the Dynamics of Gendered Labour and Unpaid Care Work Among Transgender Persons in Sri Lanka

Kaushalya Ariyaratne<sup>1</sup> & Thenu Ranketh<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction and Objective

“Care work” or “social reproductive work” refers to the actions that go into sustaining and reproducing labour in the so-called “private” sphere. Human survival necessitates “social reproductive activities” or caring activities, where capitalist economic systems are based on non-monetised and unrestricted social reproduction, which is devalued and exploitative even when it is paid for. This causes a crisis, destabilising the social reproduction process, and the moral argument in terms of the “crisis” of social reproduction or the “crisis” of care is stronger today.

Even though there are numerous accounts of how the division of labour operates within heterosexual and cisgender families, there are lesser accounts of how transgender partners are affected by care work in general and in Sri Lanka among academic literature. Therefore, this article attempts to address this gap by inquiring into the narratives of three selected transgender persons/couples who live with their partners in the same house, further problematising the concepts/notions of “woman” and “family.” The purpose of this paper is to explore how self-perception of being a transgender person has affected the division of labour in the household.

In this paper, the authors probed a primary research question from participants: What do narratives by the selected participants in Sri Lanka reveal about the relationship between transgender identities and the division of household labour? As a sub-question, we also

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inquired how their transition process and their self-perceptions about gender have influenced in dividing unpaid household labour between partners. Based on the assumption that transgender persons hold more fluid and flexible ideas about gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation, we tried to explore how this fluidity has persuaded the division of household labour among the selected families.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature**

### **a. Care Gap and Crisis**

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), unpaid care work is one of the three categories of the classification of labour; i.e., providing unpaid domestic services for own financial use within households, providing unpaid caregiving services to household members and providing community service and help to other households (Charmes, 2019: 8). Across the world, women carry out three-quarters of unpaid care work, or more than 75 percent of the total hours provided across the world, without exception, while women dedicate on average 3.2 times more time than men to unpaid care work. There is no country where women and men perform an equal share of unpaid care work (Charmes, 2019). "...Not only has housework been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (Federici, 1975: 2)

The crisis of care is felt in a variety of ways, including childcare, managing and caring of families, friends, and the broader community, and in general in social relationships and networks. Historically, the effort that goes into sustaining and reproducing these social conditions, which are vital for human society's existence and thriving, has been seen as "emotion work" (Erickson 2005) separate from the creation of commodities and principally as women's primary tasks. This job is generally imbued with a "moral" meaning – virtues of "good" and "decent" women, characteristics of "ideal" families, and ideals of joyful domesticity (Elson, 2017). On the one hand, the labour that goes into providing this care – social reproductive work – is mostly unpaid and it is increasingly confined to the private/individual domain, particularly households. This distinction between the social and economic crises, on the other hand, is a false duality (Erickson, 2005).

Tornello (2020) argues that among cisgender heterosexual couples, household and childcare labour is typically specialized, with cisgender women doing disproportionately more of the unpaid labour, especially childcare, and men engaging in more paid labour outside the home. Tornello (2020) further argues that in contrast, for same-sex couples, the division of unpaid labour is reported to be much more egalitarian in nature.

Blood and Wolfe (1960) introduced the relative resource theory that divided unpaid labour based on the amount of resources, specifically the level of education and income each member of the couple possesses. The partner with higher educational attainment and an individual income is less responsible for household and childcare labour. However, Tornello (2020) suggests that among sexual and gender minority couples, this theory shows mixed research results. The time constraint theory, introduced by Presser (1994), argues that the partner who works more hours in paid labour has less unpaid care work responsibility at home. Again, Tornello (2020) has shown that this theory is relevant to sexual and gender minority couples, as several research studies have proved. Life course theory (Elder, 1994) has examined the ways in which relationship status, length of the relationship and family design can affect how couples designate their unpaid care work.

Further, Tornello (2020) has found in her study, that transgender and gender non-binary parents reported dividing their household and childcare labour in egalitarian ways than cisgender parents, while there is clear support for the time-constraint theory and the life course theory. Tornello further argues that similar to cisgender and sexual minority couples, gendered design of transgender and gender non-binary couples do not play a role in how unpaid labour was divided, whereas cisgender and heterosexual couple's division of labour typically is being shaped by gender role expectations or assumptions. She argues that the greater gender and sexual identity flexibility could lead transgender and gender non-binary couple to negotiate and decide the division of unpaid labour based on personal preferences.

For the purpose of this paper, we consider unpaid care work as all unpaid services within a household for its members, including care of elderly persons and other family members, domestic work including cooking, cleaning, and childcare and voluntary community work done by the participants of this study.

## **b. Who is a Transgender Person?**

The term transgender is often used as an inclusive category for a wide range of identities, including transsexuals, transvestites, male and female impersonators, drag kings and queens, male-to-female (MTF) persons, female-to-male (FTM) persons, cross-dressers, gender benders, gender variants, gender nonconforming, and ambiguously gendered persons, according to Western terminology. As Stoller describes, “gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other...gender role is the overt behaviour one displays in society, the role which he plays, especially with other people” (1968: 9–10). Many people may have concerns and challenges in articulating their sense of self within the social interpellation of their gender and they may search for the significance of their lived gender experience, but not challenge the gender classification that was given to them at birth.

The meanings of gender presentations differ across geographic contexts (Kazyak, 2012). In contrasting historical and contemporary discourses of queer gender identity, Winter (2008) argues that the natal anatomic view of gender has been the mainstream view of the West, where the Judaeo-Christian psychiatric schools of thought are rooted, while some Eastern cultures that were less influenced by the West may have cultivated a more liberal and accepting attitude towards transgenders. For instance, in a study on the male to female (MTF) Kathoey community in Thailand, Winter found that conventional thinking in Thai society is centred around three sex/gender categories, not two (2008), while Ariyaratne (2020) highlights the lack of English terms to identify certain transgender communities such as self-identified *nachchi* in Sri Lanka.

Analysing the example of Thai homosexuality and transgender cultures, Peter Jackson (1999, 2001 and 2009) methodically narrated how Asian queer cultures were transformed by diverging or decoupling from those in the West. In a discussion about gender/sexuality and marginalised communities in East India, Anuruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014) argue that the attempted universalisation of transgender as a transnational umbrella term by the development sector and the state tends to subsume South Asian discourses and practices of gender/sexual variance as local experiences, without interrogating the conceptual baggage associated with them.

Blackwood and Wieringa (2007) argue that it is impossible to essentialise or universalise human experiences in the West, which may not be relevant to the rest of the world. Wijewardene (2007) states that the term trans should represent our revolution in our thinking of gender as an “unstable category of identity” that is regulated by power. Thus, it becomes a politically safe definition that can mean everything and nothing.

Based on Wijewardene’s (2007) argument that self-perceptions that fill the vacuum of understanding themselves can give rise to subversive possibilities, we have interviewed three persons who identify themselves as transgender persons for the purpose of this paper. We believe that this self-perception is important in this context, in order to understand how they perceive their gender roles and care work in the domestic sphere.

## **Methodology**

As elaborated above, for the purpose of this paper, we have selected three self-identified transgender persons who have gone through hormone/medical interventions and currently live with their married/unmarried partners. They were selected from three different locations in Sri Lanka through our personal relationships. The discussions were held not with a rigid questionnaire, but as relaxed, long conversations. The objective of these conversations was clearly described to the participants and they could refuse to answer or withdraw any answer at any point. We were concerned about their confidentiality and safety; therefore, all the names/places are anonymised in this paper. At the same time, as authors of this paper, we were self-reflexive about our own privileged positions. One author identifies himself as a trans person while the other is a cisgender woman.

All three of the interviewed persons have gone through hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgeries in Sri Lanka. Acknowledging the term transgender is a vibrant and heterogenous term, the purpose of selecting persons who have undergone medical treatments was to find out the role of medical health interventions in negotiating their self-perception of gendered labour. We named them Rashmi, Savithry and Mahesh. Of the three, Rashmi and Savithry identify themselves as trans women and Mahesh identifies himself as a trans man. Rashmi and Savithry live with legally married heterosexual partners, while

Mahesh has separated from the legal marriage, but lives with another heterosexual partner. Rashmi is married to a trans man. Rashmi and Mahesh belong to Sinhala-Buddhist family background, while Savithry comes from a Tamil-Christian background. We marked their ethnicities, since it may have had a significant impact on their upbringing. Our informal discussions were based on their experience of domestic labour in the household, the experience through the transition process which involved the healthcare sector, and the experience and perspectives of their labour in the household before and after the transition.

Firstly, transgender men and women were selected for the paper due to their relative absence across the academic literature on unpaid care work. Secondly, to mark that transgender communities are not a homogenous, monolithic group of people, we have tried to accommodate different trans identities as much as possible, even though they all have gone through sex reassignment surgeries. However, we acknowledge that in order to establish generalised overviews of different transgender persons' experiences, a bigger, wider, and disaggregated sample is needed. Therefore, we reiterate that this paper analyses certain aspects of self-perceptions of gender and unpaid care work among selected persons, without attempting to make oversimplified claims of transgender family structures in contemporary Sri Lanka.

## **Process of Transition**

Following complaints from three transgender women in Sri Lanka to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka in 2015 after being rejected by the Department of Registrar General to change their legal gender, a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) was proposed that would be accepted by all authorities to indicate gender on official documents, including the Birth Certificate, National Identity Card and Passport. The Ministry of Health released a circular in June 2016 detailing the criteria for awarding the GRC. The draft certificate allows a doctor to certify that a transgender person has been referred to hormone therapy and required surgical care and that the individual has undergone the care. Concurrently, the Registrar General's Department of Sri Lanka also issued a circular in 2016 titled "Procedure to change the name and gender of transgender persons' birth certificates." According to this circular, in order to qualify to change the name and gender on the Birth Certificate, a person has to first approach a psychiatrist who works for a government hospital and can issue a GRC.

Despite the fact that World Health Organisation has declassified Gender Dysphoria as a mental health issue, medical scholars have argued that this declassification is “controversial” as it is always a psychiatrist who deals with such persons (Malalgama, 2017: 27). In Sri Lanka once a person consults a psychiatrist in order to obtain the GRC, it is the psychiatrist who “takes the crucial decision” on whether the person is allowed to obtain it or not. In this process of identification, the psychiatrist’s discretionary power is unrestricted, and the most important decisions on the life of the individual who is going to obtain the GRC to modify their documents depend on the psychiatrist’s acceptance. For example, the Real Life Test which is conducted by doctors is designed to assess how one would cope with his/her gender transition in the “real” life. The purpose of the Real Life Test is to confirm that a transgender person can function successfully as a member of that gender in society and to confirm that he or she is sure that he or she wants to live the same gender for the rest of his or her life. Therefore, the medical health sector in Sri Lanka still possesses a strong discretionary power in determining the possibility of gender change among transgender communities (Ariyaratne, 2021).

It is interesting to highlight that both transwomen recalled some of the questions asked by the doctors who assessed their “history.” In Savithry’s words:

“I remember the doctor asked me what I like to do at home. At that time I was a boy. Since my parents did not expect me to do so, I did not engage much in household chores, like cooking, cleaning. I remember explaining to the doctor that I like cooking and that at times I helped my mother cook at home.” (Emphasis added by the authors)

Rashmi confirmed that she remembers the doctor taking her “case history” asking about the work that she does at home and outside, apart from the way she dressed and behaved, especially about cooking and taking care of her sister’s little daughter. She thinks that the doctor did a “great help” by identifying her “inner feelings as a woman,” (Emphasis added by the authors)

Interviewing a Psychiatrist, Ariyaratne (2021) quotes;

“I usually find out if he works in the kitchen to help his mother at home, or he does male work at home – such as doing heavy work, going to a shop to buy groceries. If he was a boy, in his real life, he should be interested in doing boys’ work in his real life.” (2021: 74) (Emphasis added by the authors)

Interestingly, Mahesh, as a trans man did not recall answering questions about housework. Instead, he remembers discussing his clothes, hairstyle, and shoes with the doctor. He had been asked whether he was feeling comfortable “appearing as a man in the society.” It is interesting to note that both the trans women recalled doctors’ questions about household work, while the trans man did not recall any.

Foucault (1979) sought to understand how the modern individual came to be and how the modern form of power came to be. Foucault’s focus was on the changing relationship between the human body and power; this changing relationship, he argued, had an effect on the operation of power in general. He elaborates that there is a relationship between power and knowledge. Institutional power – for example, the power of schools, medical health institutions and the justice system – and the construction of knowledge are deeply interlinked. Together they shape the desires of the individual and the way they understand their place in the world. Every social norm, every impulse that society takes for granted, Foucault seeks to show, is historically produced and dependent on the systems of knowledge that created it. Power rests on the production of what is “normal.” In this context, doctors have made it clear how this power-knowledge regime governs the bodies of transgender persons who consult them to obtain GRC. However, it was not clear how far the two interviewed trans women have internalised this normative behaviour as an essential part of their identity; rather, they seemed to take women’s unpaid labour at home for granted and neither showed any surprise nor resistance to it.

## **Housework: Before and After**

All three of them recalled their memories of childhood. Before the transition process, they were all treated as children of the opposite gender by their parents. For example, Savithry explained, as a boy her mother wanted him to go out and bring groceries from the nearby shop,



whereas her sister was assigned work inside the home by their mother. While Savithry and Rashmi did not recall any resistance to any work they were assigned, Mahesh explained how he disliked helping his mother with the kitchen work and always wanted to go out and play with the other boys in the neighbourhoods.

“I always wanted to stay outside of my home, climbing trees, playing cricket with friends. Before I reached puberty my parents were not that strict, however, after the puberty ceremony, they stopped me from going out to play cricket. Instead, I had to learn housework....I do not remember exactly how I resisted, but I remember having fights with my mother.”

This can be attributed to the gendered practices and beliefs of the larger society, which has always expected girls to be disciplined and modest, while resistance coming from young boys is permitted. As their upbringing is in stereotypical family environments, they carry forward such values and grow up understanding gender normative behaviours established within themselves. Most importantly, the medical professionals who support them for transition also continue to pass on these prejudices through their “assessments” of gendered behaviour. When moving from one gender binary to the other, these prejudices could be subtly appropriated by the questions of the doctors.

The discussions about marriage with all three of them were mainly centred around their relationships and the division of labour in the household. Savithry is still pursuing her higher education while Rashmi, a homemaker, does not do any paid labour job. Mahesh does a job and earns for the family. Savithry’s and Rashmi’s family incomes are mainly handled by their husbands while their parents also provide a certain support. All three of them do a considerable amount of care work for their parents who live with them.

The perceptions about unpaid care work at home of all three were interestingly parallel. They all expressed it as women’s primary responsibility. For instance;

Rashmi: “As a woman I do almost all the cooking and cleaning at home, since my mother is old and sick. My husband earns for the family. Therefore, I have to support him by doing all the house work. I like trying new recipes and feed my parents and husband. My husband enjoys my new recipes. I never complain about house work, because when I did my transition from man to a woman, I knew my responsibilities as a woman.” (Emphasis added by authors)

Savithry: “My husband wants me to make him a nice cup of tea when he comes home from work, which I like to do very much. But when I have all the cooking and cleaning at home, I don’t like him asking me for tea” (laughing).

Mahesh: “I think woman is the best home-maker. I had several problems with my wife, because she doesn’t wake up early for cooking, when we both went to work. Especially because of that, my mother did not like her. She used to have long telephone conversations with friends, when there is so much work to finish at home. This was one of the problems that caused our break up.”

As a result, Mahesh got separated from his wife and is now living with another heterosexual, woman partner. When asked about the new relationship he elaborated;

“My new partner wakes up early morning and cooks for us. She does all her household duties with due diligence. My mother is also happy about her.” (Emphasis added by authors)

It is noteworthy that their ideas about the institution of marriage comes with the integral notion of gendered labour division. The household is conceived by them not as a space for reproduction and recreation where women have the primary responsibility. As Marx and Engels (1845) pointed out, the gendered labour division in the household is the origin of all other divisions including the concept of private property. As quoted in Huws (2012):

The division of labour ... is based on the natural division of labour in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property, but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others. (2012: 2-3)

Historically, the natural reproductive role of childbearing and nursing was thought to be the aspect that constrained the economic engagements of women, it has been gradually developed into an integral part of gender. Even though Rashmi, Savithry and Mahesh have transitioned from one gender binary to the other questioning their assigned gender at birth, they did not question this gendered labour division. Rather, all three of them, who entered into a monogamous marriage which was historically derived from the private property system, stated that they considered this division to be natural or inherited.

“It [house work] is something women are expected do in a marriage.” (Savithry)

“I have a good marriage life, because I fulfil my duties as a woman.” (Rashmi)

“It is what I expect from her [wife/partner].” (Mahesh)

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the three theories presented above, i.e., relative resource theory, time constraint theory, and life course theory have no applicability in all three cases presented in this paper. However, Mahesh stated that he sometimes “helps” his partner for house work if they had time, which is somewhat similar to what was presented by the time constraint theory, while Savithry stated that her husband supports ‘if he had time’. However, they both did not accept that their partners have equal or primary responsibility for house work. Rather, they liked to imagine their marriages in the framework of “breadwinner / housewife” model.

At the end of discussions, we asked all three of them how they imagine an ideal womanhood/manhood and received the following answers;

Rashmi: “My life as a woman is perfect with my husband who understands me, supports me, and takes care of me. Therefore, my duty is to fulfil his needs at home. I have a contented life with him. That is what I think of as the advantage of becoming a woman.”

Savithry: “I would like to earn for myself, because I do not want to ask money from my husband to nurture my parents. When I found a job and take care of my old parents, while supporting my husband’s businesses, then I can be satisfied with my life as a woman.”

Mahesh: “A man should be able to gain financial stability to take care of his wife and family. Without financial strength, a man is nobody. Therefore, changing my gender identity as a man means becoming a financially and emotionally strong person.”

It is interesting to note that their self-perceptions about their gender are in some way connected with their paid/unpaid work in public and private spheres. While Mahesh’s sense of being a man connects to financial stability achieved through paid work in a public space, Rashmy and Savithry express their contented lives fulfilled by household duties in private spaces.

## Conclusion

West and Zimmerman claim that sex and gender are independent categories requiring analytical distinction. They conceptualized “doing gender” as a “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (1978: 125). These three case studies are informed by this argument, which asserts being born male or female does not inevitably make one a man or a woman; instead, becoming a man or woman is an ongoing, iterative, interactional, and social process. West and Zimmerman (1978) state that ‘doing gender’ involved multifaceted socially-guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast certain pursuits as expressions of masculine and of feminine natures. As such, it is important to contextualise the gender identities of three transgender persons in connection with their everyday labour.

Firstly, as we have pointed out in this chapter, both transgender women were asked about their labour at the household by the doctor who ‘assessed’ them for the ‘suitability’ of transition from one binary to the other. Even though there is no evidence to claim that Savithry and Rashmi were manipulated by these questions to imagine their womanhood, it can be argued that these questions re-establish the notions of gender identity with their connection to unpaid labour in the private sphere. Thus, the medical health sector and its established scientific knowledge may contribute to endorsing self-perceptions of gender among transgender persons who undergo sex reassignment surgeries and gender change in Sri Lanka.

Secondly, all three transgender persons whom we interviewed linked their gender performativity to traditional notions of the gendered division of labour. All of them who have entered into heterosexual marriages were also experiencing tensions and hierarchies among family members. This highlights the fact that their gender transition and fluidity have a lesser impact on heterosexual family structures. Both Savithry and her husband, who identified themselves as transgender persons, especially Savithry who is married to a trans man, have shown less egalitarian or equal sharing of domestic work.

This paper indeed is not adequate to generalise the claim that transgender persons are rigid in family structures and gendered division of labour. Such a hypothesis can be tested in a much larger research work with a diverse and comprehensive sample. What we have attempted in this paper was to present the gist of a potential research and scholarly work on the nuanced subject of less-represented members of transgender communities in Sri Lanka.

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# “Who Else Will Do the Housework?” The Depiction of Unpaid Care Work in Memes

Dishani Senaratne

## Introduction

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වැඩට යනි  
ගැහැණු

**Women return  
to work  
after work**

By Lakshantha Athukorala (2016)  
Translated by the author [from Susumakin Suli Sulanga  
(Sighing Whirlwind)]

Athukorala’s short but evocative poem succinctly brings out how women are compelled to work long hours at home, after having worked long hours at the job. Decades ago, Hochschild and Machung (1989) echoed that men were unwilling to share household responsibilities, resulting in employed women engaging in a “second shift” of carrying out household chores. Reverberating these views, Moen (1992) noted that women who engage in remunerated jobs face the challenge of balancing employment and domestic responsibilities, which was termed the “double burden.” Typically, unpaid care work is viewed as a female responsibility, rooted in gendered stereotypes, roles, and norms. More recently, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increased demand for housework, with the introduction of the work-from-home policy and the shift to online teaching.



This chapter is divided into four parts. First, it brings out the theoretical underpinnings of unpaid care work. It is followed by an outline of research questions and the methodology. Next, the chapter reveals how memes contribute to and create online discourses on unpaid care work and the underlying ideologies embedded in them. The final section highlights a significant finding of the study, which is how memes depicting unpaid care work are shaped by gender ideologies and in turn reproduce, or challenge, gender ideologies.

## **Theoretical Review of Unpaid Care Work**

The academic discourses on unpaid care work have been largely informed by the feminist waves that took place in the Global North. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution from the 18th to 19th centuries across Europe and North America, the first wave of feminism emerged, centring on gaining legal rights for women, particularly suffrage for women. During this period, more and more women opted to work at newly established mines and factories, albeit often being paid less than men. World War II (1939 -1945) also saw an exodus of women taking up jobs (either voluntary or paid) previously occupied by their male counterparts who had been conscripted into the military. Focusing on a wide range of issues like reproductive rights and domestic violence, the second wave of feminism which initially emerged during the 1960s to 1970s in post-war Europe later adopted a more inclusive approach with the contribution and participation of women of colour and women from the Global South. Against the larger backdrop of a new postcolonial and post-socialist world order, the third wave of feminism came to the fore in the mid-1990s, encouraging women to express their sexualities and individualities. These watershed events shaped the feminist discourses on unpaid care work, as evidenced by the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that highlighted for the first time formal global recognition of unpaid care work.

Unpaid care work refers to the provision of direct or indirect care (including both active and supervisory care) performed without pay or the expectation of pay within the household that includes but is not limited to cooking, doing the laundry, cleaning and caring for children, elderly and sick persons. According to Benoit and Hallgrímsdóttir (2011), unpaid care work is that which is carried out for personal consumption or for others that includes household work, childcare, attendance to the needs of the disabled or elderly, and community service. On a macro level, Moser (1993) outlined three spheres which were termed the “triple burden” that encompassed the different roles

and responsibilities that are expected to be performed by women: reproductive work, productive work and community work. Apart from this triple burden, women's mental load, which is a combination of cognitive and emotional labour, operates within families and society, which could impact women's work and leisure time (Dean et al., 2022). These perspectives disclose that unpaid care work is almost akin to a continuum of household work.

Through a capitalist lens, domestic work is termed "reproductive work" that is deemed central to capitalism, for its role played in sustaining the current and future workforce who engages /will engage in productive work. In other words, productive labour is contingent on reproductive labour on a daily and generational basis, the latter being a set of tasks that maintain and reproduce life (Folbre, 1994). This binary conceptualisation of productive and reproductive work implies that the two types of work are considered autonomous phenomena, according to tenets of capitalism.

Why is unpaid care work often viewed as a female prerogative? In the early 19th century, the ideological dichotomy of private/public spheres gained momentum. This means that the former was associated with women, with the home perceived as "pure, secure and serene." The latter, on the contrary, was viewed as "impure, uncertain and turbulent" that was linked with men. While male labour force participation gradually increased, carrying out household chores was begun to be seen as a female responsibility. To this day, domesticity continues to be defined as the epitome of "feminine charm," characterised by gendered stereotypes.

Writing about the then less-discussed topic of female desire to accomplish goals outside their homes, Friedan (1963) made a poignant statement that resonates even with most contemporary women: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (Friedan, 1963, p. 19). She also stated that the problem has no name, implying the sense of dissatisfaction women experienced stemming from the widespread notion of an ideal housewife. Decades earlier, in the eyes of Engels (1884), women in the Victorian era were servants and effectively prostitutes who were trapped in traditional monogamous households. While Engels' attitudes towards women are unmistakably misogynistic, they shed light on how women were historically relegated to the domestic sphere.

To what extent do men shoulder or are willing to shoulder household responsibilities? Surprisingly or not, men are in general more willing to accept and affirm equality in the bedroom than to accept equality around housework and childcare, as argued by bell hooks (2000). Even in so-called modern corporate settings, women are often seen doing what is termed as “office housework,” for example unpacking the dishwasher and cleaning someone else’s dirty dishes (Halpin, 2019). Such episodes point towards how unpaid care work continues to take different shapes over time.

Giving a ray of hope for advocates for gender equality, political conversations around the inclusion of unpaid care work to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) have emerged, with the target 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) encouraging states to “recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.” In line with this target of the SDGs, the Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka conducted its inaugural Time Use Survey in 2017, with the objective of gauging how individuals spend their time on activities related to unpaid care work. This survey revealed that 86.4% of female respondents engaged in unpaid care work whereas only 54% of male respondents did so (Department of Census and Statistics, 2017). Sri Lankan women are not alone in performing most of the household chores. Since the 1960s women across the world have contributed more to household work than their male counterparts, according to Bianchi et al. (2006). These figures lay bare that contemporary women still carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work.

Despite single-handedly carrying out unpaid care work, it is ironic that women are often tagged as “dependents” within their family units (GK, 2021). Paradoxically, most women themselves claim that they “simply stay at home and do nothing,” underpinned by the belief that only remunerated work could be counted as actual work. Unpaid care work is deemed secondary to paid work partly because the former is carried out within the domestic sphere by women without pay or the expectation of pay.

In a landmark judgment, India’s Supreme Court recently pronounced that it is vital to discard the popularly held idea that women who perform domestic chores provide no economic contribution to their households. Taking a step further, the Indian Supreme Court ordered an insurance company to pay a higher claim amount, having considered unpaid

care work done by a deceased woman. Such developments could be regarded as an important milestone on the road towards recognition of women's unpaid care work.

The monetisation of unpaid care work, however, has been a contentious issue. On the one hand, women engage in unpaid care work out of a sense of obligation, translating into their lives a contradictory process characterised by ambivalence and guilt that stifle complaint (Aronson, 1992). On the other, assigning monetary value to unpaid care work undermines the mental satisfaction that women themselves claim to derive by engaging in such work (Ferrant et al., 2014). In other words, the commodification of unpaid care work exclusively through the prism of neoliberal capitalism is a reductionist approach.

Founded on the idea that the cost of women's work at home is immeasurable, the Wages for Household (WfH) campaign marked its 50th anniversary in 2022. Despite such calls to action for recognition of unpaid care work, broadening the concept of labour is yet to gain momentum. Celebrating International Worker's Day pivoting around remunerated labour while failing to acknowledge women's share of unpaid care work is a case in point. Going beyond assigning monetary value, recognition of unpaid care work should entail acknowledging women's immense contribution to the care economy. Elson (2017) advocated the idea of recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work as a viable strategy to bridge the gender gap.

The class inequalities of unpaid care work can be seen when economically vulnerable women who have had less access to education are hired by families possessing sufficient economic means to perform unpaid care work so that educated women could engage in paid employment outside their homes. Sadly, domestic workers are considered to be a source of cheap labour, even if there continues to be a high demand for domestic services in the labour market. Commenting on how women in developing countries leave their families to travel to more developed countries to care for the children of well-off families, Hochschild (2000) observed how these women in turn hire other poorer women in their own countries to care for their children, creating a series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring. This, however, may not be an accurate description of most Sri Lankan female domestic workers based in West Asia who lack the financial means to gain access to paid caregiver services for their families. Amid the severe economic crisis facing Sri Lanka, the Cabinet of Ministers recently eased the controversy-ridden Family Background Report (FBR) regulation imposed on all women seeking overseas jobs.<sup>1</sup>

On one level, the incumbent government's move seemingly lifted mobility restrictions placed on women, enabling them to gain access to work overseas. On another level, it shows how state authorities swiftly reverse policies during turbulent times, regardless of whether they are flawed or not.

In sum, unpaid care work has been the focal point of academic scrutiny for decades. Such multifaceted viewpoints affirm that the landscape of care work is both complex and vibrant.

## Research Objectives and Methodology

Introduced by Richard Dawkins in his seminal text *The Selfish Gene*, the term meme was defined as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins, 1976, p. 206). Analogous to genes, memes spread from person to person by copying or imitation, Dawkins (1976) further explicated. With the advent of social media, especially Facebook, memes became a ubiquitous component of digital culture. In Shifman's (2014) contemporary conception of the term, an internet meme encompasses a collection of user-generated content (mostly images or video) that share some form or common characteristics within its content. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), a successful meme possesses three features: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Shifman (2014), on the other hand, identified humour, simplicity, and potential for participation, among others, as success factors of a meme.

Using a purposive sample of ten image- or text-based memes referencing aspects of unpaid care work originally posted between January and June 2022 on Facebook, this chapter attempts to explore how memes depict women's lived experiences of unpaid care work in the Sri Lankan context and the underlying ideologies embedded in them. Methodologically, Shifman's (2013) communication-oriented typology of three memetic dimensions were employed to analyse the corpus of memes: content, form, and stance (Shifman, 2013, p. 363). While there is an extensive body of research on unpaid care work, this chapter hopes to fill a gap in previous literature by focusing on how memes represent different facets of unpaid care work. Two limitations of the research were the small sample selection and being limited to memes written in Sinhala.

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<sup>1</sup> Purportedly hailed as a measure taken to combat family disintegration caused due to the absence of the mother, the FBR was introduced in the aftermath of the 2013 execution of an under-aged domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. In practice, however, many women reportedly opt to migrate for work, having circumvented this requirement.

## What's in a Meme? The Analysis

Ten memes revolving around unpaid care work from Facebook were purposively selected for the study, as mentioned in the previous section. The focus of discussion of the sample of memes ranged from the invisibility of unpaid care work to motherhood martyrdom.

Framed within the perceived Buddhist concept of pin (merit or a beneficial force that results from past good deeds), Figure 1 expresses, alongside two smiley face emojis, that a woman who has accumulated pin would find a male partner who is able to cook. Conversely, the memetic content implies that if a woman's male partner is inept at cooking, she has committed sins in her past life. Simply put, a man's culinary skills are supposedly contingent upon a woman's meritorious acts.

The stance of Figure 1 subscribes to the widely held misconception about Buddhism that the deeds committed in previous lives always determine one's current life. Apart from conveying a distorted version of the Buddhist concept of pin, misogyny is subtly interwoven in the stance of Figure 1.

Typically, cooking is viewed as a gendered task instead of considering it as an important life skill which can be learnt by anyone, irrespective of gender identity. Unlike men, women are generally expected to learn to cook from a young age and are often deemed a failure for not being able to successfully carry out household work. On the contrary, the culinary skills of men rarely become a topic for discussion. The stance of Figure 1, therefore, is a sad reflection on the wider society's understanding of the convergence of culinary skills and gender norms shaped by perceived religious beliefs. Not only that, the stance of Figure 1 implicitly heaps all blame on women for men's inability to cook which could be linked to a much deeper problem, the long-standing tendency to hold women accountable for the wrongdoings and flaws of men.

Figure 1:

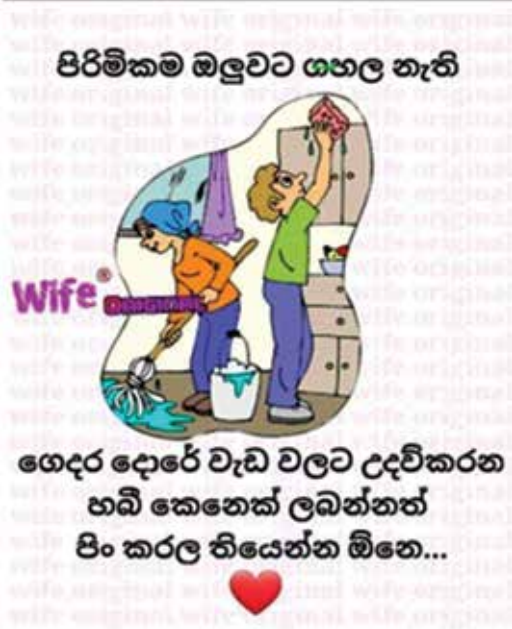
“A woman who has engaged in meritorious acts in her past life would find a man who is able to cook.”



In response to Figure 1, a female user jokingly commented that she would only marry a man who is familiar with the entire Sinhala alphabet, a play with the word uyanna (a homonym which means to cook or the character u in the Sinhala alphabet). This comment triggered a barrage of verbal attacks carried out by women against fellow women who possess limited cooking skills. “I’m happy to cook for my husband and children. Those [women] who are unable to prepare even a pol sambol (a spicy traditional Sri Lankan dish made from coconut) will look for men who are able to cook,” a female user responded. Echoing these sentiments, another female user commented that she doesn’t need a man who is able to cook because she’s a good cook herself. Manifesting strands of internalised sexism in the digital world, women are seemingly not hesitant to downgrade other women to be regarded as “worthy women,” through the lens of patriarchy.

The text of Figure 2, coupled with the picture of a man and a woman cleaning the kitchen alongside the red heart emoji, expresses that a woman who has accumulated pin (in her previous life) would find a man who helps with the domestic chores, without being concerned about his manliness. Similar to the content of Figure 1, the perceived idea of pin takes centre stage at the Figure 2 as well.

In addition, the content of Figure 2 gives the impression that doing housework is an exclusively female responsibility that in turn gives rise to the widespread belief that engaging in household chores robs men of their masculinity. Portraying women and girls as caregivers and nurturers in family units is reflective of how the wider society is conditioned into gender norms. Ironically, professional kitchens continue to be dominated by men while women are expected to cook at home without pay or the expectation of pay. Moreover, it is seen as an accomplishment for men to make a living from cooking whereas women cooking at home is presented as a gesture of love to the family. Such normative gender ideologies of what it means to be masculine and feminine relegate unpaid care work to women, impeding women’s socio-economic empowerment.

<p><b>Figure 2:</b></p> <p>“A woman who has engaged in meritorious acts in her past life would find a man who helps with the domestic chores without being concerned about his manliness.”</p>	 <p>පිරිමිකම ඔලුවට ගහල නැති</p> <p>ගෙදර දොරේ වැඩ වලට උදව්කරන හඬ කෙනෙක් ලබන්නත් පිං කරල තියෙන්න ඕනෙ...</p> <p>♥</p>
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In what way does the drudgery of housework take a toll on women's mental and physical health? Figure 3 contains a picture of a woman suffering from back pain. Written in first person, the poem succinctly describes that the woman is not feeling well and would like to get some rest. However, there is work to be done and she's unable to have her meal. Even worse, her tea has gone cold because she couldn't have it soon after preparation.

As evidenced by the title of the poem, the normalisation of women bearing the brunt of the workload makes it harder for them to question the patriarchal values associated with domestic work. A 2020 Facebook trend in giving detailed accounts of women's daily routine in the form of Facebook posts, aptly titled *Nonimi Mehevera* (Endless Mission), by some members of the Ladies Only Facebook group, witnessed wives and mothers describing how they engage in housework unaided from dawn to dusk.<sup>2</sup> Stemming from a sense of passive acceptance of traditional gender roles, most of the previously mentioned Facebook posts implied that changing the unequal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women is nearly impossible. "Who will do the housework?" the poem raises a rhetorical question, indicating that men seldom help with household chores and even if they opt to do so often have the privilege to choose what to do, depending on their personal preferences.

What if women made the collective decision of refraining from doing housework? Surreal as it may sound, Icelandic women went on strike for a single day in 1975, intent on highlighting their role played in the spheres of both paid and unpaid labour. In response to this unprecedented strike, Iceland's parliament passed the first Gender Equality Act guaranteeing equal pay the following year. Given such historic developments, it comes as no surprise that Iceland is today regarded as one of the most progressive countries in terms of gender equality.

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<sup>2</sup> Ladies Only is a private women-only Sri Lankan Facebook group that has approximately 235,000 members as at January 2023.

**Figure 3:**

“Women are like that...Who is there to do all the work? Have to finish it.”



Even though unpaid care work is as essential as paid work, the former is often unrecognised and devalued partly because of its invisible nature. Figure 4 shows a woman with multiple arms handling several household tasks like cooking, cleaning, ironing, and engaging in child care. Evidently, this image is symbolic of the unequal division of household labour. As a result of such heavy and unequal unpaid care work responsibilities, many women experience “time poverty,” the struggle to find time to meet their personal requirements. Chronicling women’s heavy workload at home, Hochschild and Machung (1989) noted that constant work ruptured marital relationships.

**Figure 4:**

**“Women engage in myriad tasks at home without any help and with minimal words of appreciation.”**



Using a poem, the stance of Figure 4 revolves around the key message of the invisibility of women’s unpaid care work. It brings out the sense of frustration experienced by women for receiving minimal acknowledgement, despite single-handedly carrying out household chores. Simply put, no one notices it, until it isn’t done. To further compound matters, housewives are said to be “doing nothing at home,” bringing into focus negative social perceptions of being a housewife. For centuries, women’s unpaid care work remained statistically invisible, which speaks volumes about how women’s work was dismissed as something insignificant. Surprisingly or not, women themselves have little idea of the economic value of unpaid care work. The inclusion of unpaid care work in the GDP is an overdue government policy decision, as discussed in a previous section.

Figure 4 is reflective of how social networks serve as an outlet for women not only to air out their grievances for emotional support but also to bond with other women who encounter similar experiences. In a rather desperate attempt, women are likely to share memes depicting their lived experiences to capture the virtual attention of their male counterparts, instead of adopting a confrontational approach in the physical world.

**Figure 5:**

**“I have to plan ahead, what to prepare for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Thinking about this is more difficult than cooking.”**



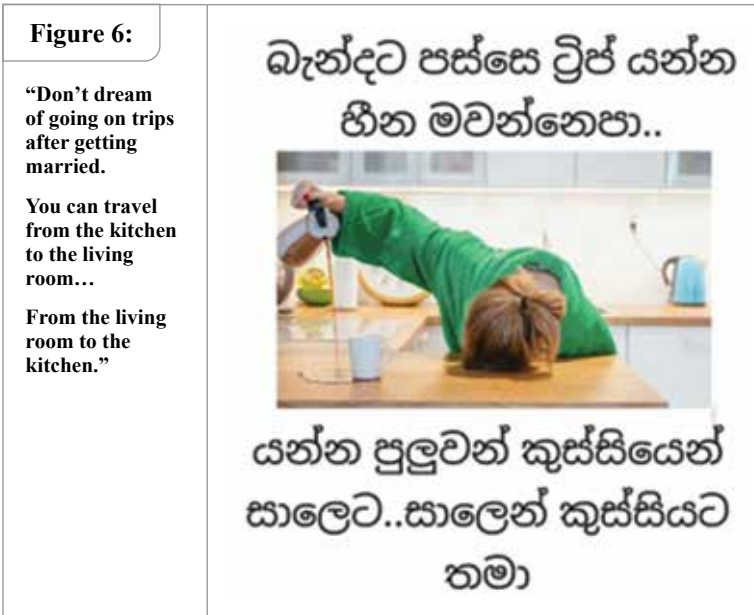
Managing a household might seem limited to physical jobs, but there’s more to it than meets the eye. The mental load, also sometimes called emotional labour, refers to invisible labour involved in managing a household. Taking mental notes on the to-do list is a good example of this hidden form of unpaid care work.

Figure 5 demonstrates an East Asian girl [possibly influenced by Korean pop culture (K-pop)] who seems to be in a pensive mood. The text of the meme reads, “At night, I plan ahead what to prepare for breakfast. In the morning, I plan ahead what to prepare for lunch. After having lunch, I plan ahead what to prepare for dinner.” The content of Figure 5 is an embodiment of women’s mental load that often impacts their work and leisure time, as discussed previously in the section on theoretical review.

With the confluence of unpaid care work and marriage, Figure 6 brings into focus the female realities vs. expectations of being married. This meme shows a woman with blonde hair, laying her head down on the kitchen countertop. It’s obvious that she is feeling overwhelmed by housework as she is pouring tea on the counter top, not into the cup.

The inclusion of the image of a woman with blonde hair in the meme is by no means an isolated occurrence. This is a textbook case of rampant colourism on social networks and internet culture. It is ironic that “white-skinned” women often become the face of all women, even in countries like Sri Lanka where the majority of the population is “dark-skinned.”

The crux of the memetic content is the perceived role of a wife. In terms of stance, prospective brides are alerted to what marriage entails for women, the sad reality of the gendered distribution of unpaid care work. Though not explicitly mentioned, this cautionary advice comes from women who have been forced to compromise on their travel dreams, and perhaps by extension their personal aspirations, after getting married. With overtones of humour, Figure 6 paints a bleak picture of how women’s mobility is restricted after getting married.



Another culturally shaped role of women that is highlighted through memes is the perceived glorification of motherhood martyrdom. The text of Figure 7 reads, “Instead of sleeping when it’s raining in the wee hours of the morning, amma (mother) is seen going to the kitchen to cook. What a sacrifice.” The image of the man thinking in bed (a stock picture of memes) as well as the crying emoji suggest that the stance of

the meme evokes feelings of sympathy for mothers who do hard work at home. Reinforcing patriarchal values, Figure 7 equates motherhood to voluntary self-sacrifice. Rather than viewing unpaid care work as a joint responsibility, such romanticised discourses on motherhood continue to place the burden on women.



Another socially constructed belief is attributing the good fortune of a household to the perceived performance of unpaid care work carried out by the mother. This means that women should successfully complete household tasks so that their houses will be filled with happiness, good health, and fortune. Needless to say, this is an unrealistic ideal that in turn perpetuates the idea that men are able to enjoy the male privilege of doing little or nothing to attract good luck to their households.

Underpinned by such gendered beliefs, Figure 8 demonstrates a woman in a sari cooking in a traditional kitchen. The text of Figure 8 gives the idea that the woman who suggests cooking whatever is available will bring good luck to her home, as opposed to the woman who often suggests eating out. The form of Figure 8 implies that cooking in the traditional way is a desirable quality for a woman. Ideally, she should also be wearing a sari, a common symbol of tradition and culture.

The narrative of a “good woman” propagated by Figure 8 seems to embody a mélange of nostalgia and tradition. Without doubt, the memetic content is ample proof of how women are often reduced to the act of cooking. It comes as no surprise that matrimonial columns in local newspapers are replete with advertisements seeking prospective brides who are competent in cooking. Sadly, the polarisation of “good” and “bad” exerts pressure on women to comply with these standards to remain indispensable and irreplaceable, even to the detriment of their mental and physical health.

**Figure 8:**

**“The woman who suggests cooking whatever is available will bring good luck to the house. Not the woman who suggests eating out today as well.”**



**අදත් කඩෙන් කමු කියන  
ගෞරවය නොව  
තියෙන දෙයක් උයලා කමු  
කියන ගෞරවය  
නිවසට යහපත උදා කරයි**

**Figure 9:**

“Even after waking up feeling shaky in the morning, we rush to the kitchen because we love cooking.”



Using ironic overtones, the text of Figure 9 mentions that even after waking up feeling shaky in the morning, women rush to the kitchen because they love cooking. The stance of the meme is intended to be light-hearted humour. Admittedly, this veil of humour could undermine the negative consequences of longstanding gendered inequalities at home. To put plainly, viewing women as synonymous with cooking is nothing but a patriarchal gender role. Whether intended or not, the sharing of so-called funny memes, especially by women themselves, could downplay the scale and nature of unpaid care work.

Unlike the previously discussed Figure 4, which depicts the sense of frustration experienced by women for receiving minimal acknowledgement, Figure 9 carries a humorous stance on the burden of women’s unpaid care work. This is a classic example of how memes play an ambivalent role in reinforcing, naturalising, and challenging gender norms and stereotypes. On the other hand, the ubiquitous presence of a “fair-skinned” girl in Figure 9 is a manifestation of colourism on media and social networks, as discussed earlier.



The text of Figure 10 expresses that leaving a little child when going to work is one of the most painful experiences for a mother. The image embedded in Figure 10, an infant and a woman (presumably the mother) making a video call, shows how technology is used to stay connected with children while at work.

Analogous to the previously discussed Figure 7, Figure 10 perpetuates the sacrifices of motherhood, underpinned by the patriarchal belief that child care responsibilities, among other domestic chores, invariably fall on women's shoulders. Moreover, giving up on paid employment is depicted as a manifestation of "motherly love" in popular discourses on motherhood.

Framing the childcare crisis as a problem faced exclusively by women compounds the socio-economic realities of child care. In reality, unpaid care work is the missing link that influences gender gaps in labour outcomes (Ferrant et al., 2014). As is the case elsewhere, Sri Lanka is no stranger to this phenomenon. A recent study revealed that both monetary and non-monetary costs, particularly child care-related costs, are an important operative factor in female labour force participation in Sri Lanka (Verité Research, 2022). Such numerical data paints a bleak picture of barriers to accessing affordable and quality child care services.

Even though Sri Lanka provides free universal education from primary to tertiary levels, the state doesn't provide child care support programmes. The partially hidden figure of the caregiver (who is holding the phone) in Figure 10 is further illustrative of the sidelining of the childcare crisis. The state response to child care, however, should not be limited to the reductionist approach of setting up child care centres; propagating the idea of collective or social responsibility for care work is vital to overturn the gendered performance of care work (Amarasuriya, 2022).

Overall, some memes disseminate patriarchal norms which are deeply ingrained in the wider Sri Lankan society whereas others challenge such norms, practices, and values. Stemming from patriarchal ideologies, the perceived glorification of motherhood martyrdom in the memetic content of Figure 7 is a case in point.

**Figure 10:**

**“The mothers who go to work leaving little children at home face one of the most painful experiences in this world.”**



## **Concluding Remarks**

This study serves to highlight that memes act as an effective communication tool for women to share their perceptions and experiences of unpaid care work. Nearly all the discussed memes are originally posted by women-centric Facebook pages which are intended to be shared by women themselves, bearing testimony to how memes play a significant role in the creation and sustenance of online communities.

The shareability of memes brings women together, at least momentarily, driving them to candidly express their innermost feelings on social networks. Instead of adopting a confrontational approach in the physical world, women, on the other hand, are likely to share memes portraying unpaid care work in order to capture the virtual attention of their male counterparts. Unarguably, user engagement with memes portraying unpaid care work is a relatively new and understudied phenomenon and warrants extensive study.

Accompanied by visual elements such as images, different aspects of unpaid care work are foregrounded in the selected corpus of memes. Going beyond serving as a source of sheer entertainment, the stance of the majority of memes was not intended to evoke humour. Shifman (2014), similarly, noted that “internet memes are not necessarily confined to jokes and instead can be deadly serious” (Shifman, 2014, p. 120).

To conclude, memes depicting unpaid care work are shaped by gender ideologies and in turn reproduce or challenge gender ideologies. Even though memes rarely carry extraordinarily new ideas, their contribution to framing, reinforcing or interrogating gender norms and stereotypes is tremendous.

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# **Social Media Interventions on Unpaid Care Work: Perspectives from the Women and Media Collective**

**Velayudan Jayachithra**

## **Introduction**

In Sri Lanka there is very little recognition of unpaid care work. It is, of course, women who must take on these responsibilities. This is a key factor that contributes to the low labour force participation of women in Sri Lanka – 31.6% – while for men the figure is 71.7%. In fact, work within the home is done overwhelmingly by women, but because these activities are not categorized formally as “work” women are pushed into the “economically inactive” category and their labour is not regarded as contributing to the country’s GDP.

Unpaid care work is both an important aspect of economic activity and an indispensable factor contributing to the well-being of individuals, their families, and societies (Stiglitz et al., 2007). Every day, individuals spend time cooking, cleaning and caring for children, the ill, persons with disabilities and the elderly. These typical dutiful activities at home are portrayed in mainstream media often as responsible roles of the female character, passed onto the next generation of women. Women who sacrifice their lives on behalf of their children and family members are portrayed as super women.

This paper explains the social media interventions made by the Women and Media Collective (WMC) to bring about more awareness about unpaid care work and its burden. Social media, along with mixed media and art, were chosen as alternative tools to traditional media due to the changing social, economic and political climate in Sri Lanka from 2019-2022, as well as to make use of the many dimensions of current social media trends.

Women and Media Collective is a women's organisation established in 1984 and has been a keen advocate for changing social norms through monitoring the mainstream media and influencing policy reforms. In 1998 WMC monitored mainstream newspapers on the sexist portrayals and violence against women in the media, which was published as an analytical volume titled "Women's Rights Watch". The task was to observe the extent of misogyny in the media (including in the cinema and advertisements) and to respond to it through letters to the editor, newspaper advertisements and collective petitions. In terms of awareness raising on women's rights, the printed mode of alternative magazines called *Options* (1994) in English, *Eya* (1996) in Sinhala and *Sol* (2004) in Tamil were launched. In late 2010, WMC included new media and social media components in its media strategy, and eased out the publishing of magazines, which originally printed four issues a year, then biannually, and finally, once a year. This became a new tool for awareness raising that drastically changed the use and practice with traditional media institutions. Comparatively, the trend of using social media by WMC was emerging. This was due to effectiveness of the cost, reactions, ongoing online discussions and its indicators of the outreach.

WMC started its YouTube channel in June 2010 to discuss feminist ideology, postWMC programme content and present media related video productions such as short advocacy videos, documentaries, and women's narratives.

## **The Project on Unpaid Care Work and Social Media Initiatives**

The four-year project on Unpaid Care Work was implemented in six districts in Sri Lanka: Badulla, Batticaloa, Colombo, Gampaha, Kurunegala and Nuwara Eliya from the end of October 2018 to April 2023. The main objective of the media component was to raise awareness, create debate, discourse and messaging that would influence the redistribution of the care burden among men, women, civil society organizations, state actors and the private sector so that care is provided in a way that does not unduly burden women and girls. A mix of traditional and new media was used to disseminate the messages generated from the Sri Lanka time use survey on unpaid care work women and men do as well as other media outputs generated by the programme.

From the beginning of the project in 2019, WMC had to face many challenges due to the Easter bomb attack on the 19th of April, and the anti Muslim violence that followed in August 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to 2021, and the economic crisis in 2022. This disrupted several stages of the planned project work, limiting many of the activities in the different locations and compelled the project to adopt a more creative online presence.

The pandemic became an unexpected crisis, resulting in government lockdowns and curfews, and the closure of WMC for almost a year. The WMC media unit developed a comprehensive media strategy and created media products for awareness building that included some activities originally proposed as well as newly conceived ones. Some activities that needed to be physically conducted were transformed into digital work. This created a new outlook on how social media could be used creatively, giving WMC, specifically the unpaid care work project, a new experience searching for developing alternative communication and creatively reframing the activities into online messaging such as an art competition for children, zoom discussions, celebrations of ethnic and religious events, and special and remarkable days of the year related to unpaid care work, making a particular effort to be inclusive. The ‘Housework is work: Recognise its Value to You and to the Economy’ was a Facebook page that was created in April 2020 for awareness raising on Unpaid Care Work.<sup>1</sup>

The WMC media strategy included gender and a social inclusiveness, that comprised of a wider outreach of women, men, children, elders, and persons with disabilities. Every media product was produced in all three local languages (Sinhala, Tamil and English). For the first time, the Women and Media Collective added sign language to better accommodate the hearing and speech impaired. This paper will explain how the social media interventions worked to create a public discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Recognise its Value to You and to the Economy. <https://www.facebook.com/WMCUnPaidCareWork>. 612 Likes 670 Followers.







The trilingual advertisements calling for submissions to the Children Art Competition in 2021 organized by WMC.

The age categories were 8-10, 11-13, and 14-16 to submit the artwork. We received 203 paintings within one month and they were examined to analyze the gender portrayal of unpaid care work. Most children had recognized that women/“mother” has a major burden and the engagement of men/ “father” is minimal – such as scraping coconut, dusting the house, helping to make tea. Only one or two of the drawings included the father taking care of the children. In many many of the drawings the children had portrayed themselves helping their parents, grandparents and elders.

Art teachers from Hambanthota, Kandy, and Kurunegala telephoned to ask for more information on the meaning of unpaid care work. Teachers said that they can now explain the concept much better to the children. Some parents telephoned and asked for an explanation or definition of unpaid care work as well. What we understood from these discussions is the great need to convey and disseminate detailed information on the subject. People were unfamiliar with the term “Unpaid Care Work”, “Geweem nolabana surakum weda jegqma fkd,nk iq/l=i jev)” or “Uthiyamattra paraamarippu pani (Cjpakw;w guhkupg;G Ntiy)”. Since the lockdown forced family members to be confined in the home for months, the unpaid care work burden increased and some there was a discernible increase in domestic violence. The definition of “the family” might be broad but in this particular pandemic time the art competition was an ideal situation to discuss what care work is within the family. The competition helped children observe and reflect on what care work is, by whom it is mostly done, how it could be supported and shared, the need to appreciate the mother and bring the father into unpaid care work

role, what mostly fathers/men do at home, lack of recognition for unpaid care work, and individual and collective efforts to redistribute and share unpaid care work. These paintings were digitized and published. The 54 shortlisted paintings including the winning contributions were presented as a video after a physical exhibition and award ceremony. Some shortlisted winning drawings were printed as a trilingual calendar, published online, and used at the beginning of every month during 2022 on the FB page with the captions children gave. “*Sathuta Pirunu Ape Kussiya*”<sup>2</sup> (8-year-old) and “*We were able to spend a meaningful time together with our loved ones during the lockdowns due to Covid 19*” (12-year-old) are two paintings that successfully capture how the children came to realize that domestic chores should be shared by all family members and is an act of love.



<sup>2</sup> WMC Calendar 2022, Painting by Theekshana Widusha from Rathnapura District who won the 1st Prize of the WMC Children’s Art Competition held in 2021.

The following paintings are from students who have seen how rural women are facing the challenge of the unpaid care burden and how, if the women's work is redistributed, how their burden will be reduced.<sup>3</sup>



## Important Days of the Year

The paintings also contributed to many social media posts that were created as campaigns to celebrate significant days in the year, beyond the regular celebrations of International Women's Day and 16 days of Activism to end Violence Against Women. The WMC social media platforms shared a trilingual post with a message related to unpaid care work on World Mental Health Day, International Day of the Girl Child, International Parent's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, Elder's Day, Valentine's Day, International Children's Day, International May Day, and International Day for Family. The main objective of these posts is to show that unpaid care work is an invisible aspect of our economy and that women's contribution must be acknowledged and the work shared. All messages carried messages and hashtags on unpaid care work: "The change starts at home, value unpaid care work, recognise unpaid care work, care work is work, redistribute unpaid care work, men can share care work, women also have two hands".

<sup>3</sup> Sihina Yuhansa and Lasiru Sadeepa who submitted their paintings for the WMC Children's Art Competition, 2021.

# Women’s Unpaid Care Workload and Our Religious and Cultural Festivals

WMC’s social media footprint on unpaid care work included short video clips on selected socio-cultural events of the different ethnic and religious communities in the country such as Vesak, the Sinhala-Hindu New Year, Ramadan and Deepawali. As a multiethnic, multicultural country, religious festivals are celebrated with common public holidays. The short video series captured women’s workload during these



festivals and includes messages in different ways to each community to recognise, reduce, and redistribute the workload of domestic work and care activities at home. Each of the short festival videos was given a different storyline including the situation of the country and current issues challenging the day-to-day unpaid care work chores.

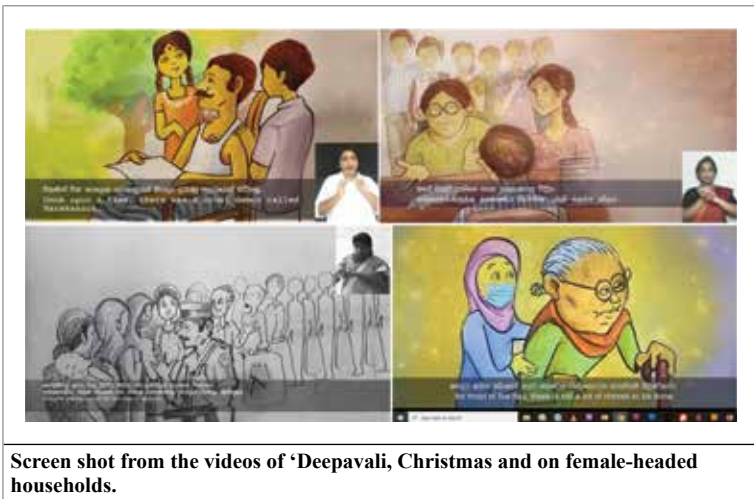
The first festival video production was in 2019, for Christmas and New Year where we produced a two-minute video. The illustrations used were conventional drawings combined with narrations, including



characters, voices and music. There was a recognition that the videos must be sensitive to ethnic diversity. Thus, subtitling in all three languages played a key role in communicating to the other communities. The videos included aspects related to culture, identity, gender, gender equality, female and male voices, and sign language.

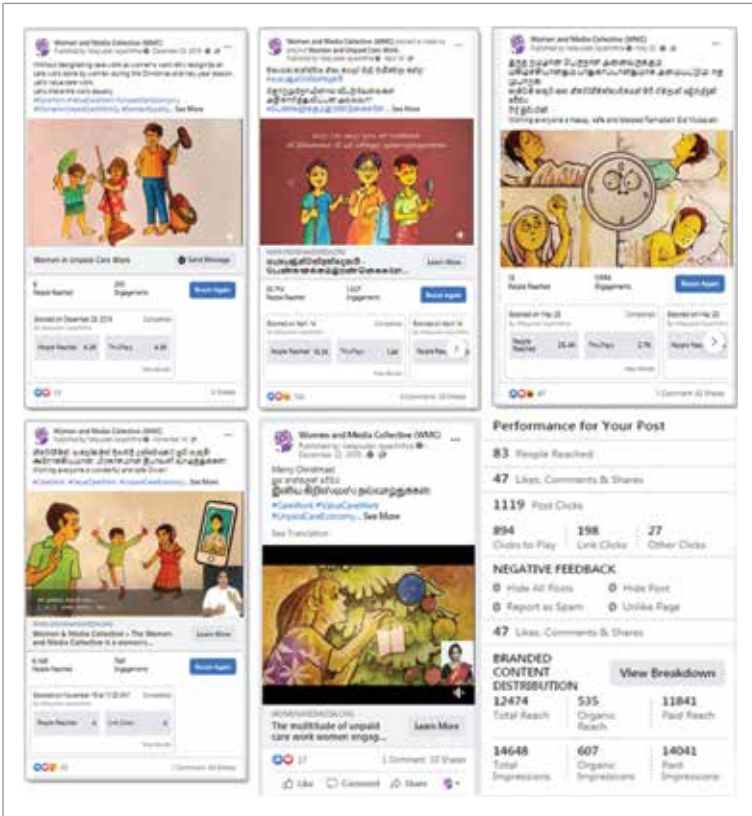
The festival ads for Deepavali in 2020 were created around the subject of the high deaths related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. The society's perception is that women were mostly responsible for protecting children and the family from the virus. A creative video was produced on a scenario where the father has to do the housework responsibilities during the Deepavali period at home. The main focus of the script was changing the gender roles on unpaid care and male participation in unpaid care work. One of the viewers, a person with a speech impairment, expressed her view that she had never heard about the story of Deepavali. She suggested the video box where the sign language speaker is placed be made bigger for easy reference. The videos started FB boosting for the first time for Women and Media Collective – reaching 12K-32K views for each video.

Another two-minute video on Christmas featured a single woman who did unpaid care work for her neighbours/society and the message was that she should be cared for and supported by the society and government to recognize her value in social involvement.



Another video highlighted the economic crisis and challenges faced by women in 2022 linked to International Widows Day – 23rd of June. It emphasised the point that the prevailing economic crisis and the burden of unpaid care work was common to all communities and highlighted the challenges faced by women breadwinners, especially mothers with children with disabilities. A prominent message here was that such women should not be identified as widows, but as women heading families or households. This video was produced during the struggle GotaGoHome ‘Aragalaya’ in 2022. Unlike the other videos, this was produced in black and white, including multiple identities and voices conveyed messaging about poverty and the economic-political abandonment of various parts in our society by politicians.

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- <sup>[1]</sup> 1. Christmas and New year, 2019/2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenandmediacollective/videos/2678318355728662>
2. April Sinhala-Hindu Festivals, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/WMCUnPaidCareWork/videos/1156073491394576>
3. Wesak festival, <https://web.facebook.com/WMCUnPaidCareWork/videos/308008447467835>
4. Eid Mubaarak, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenandmediacollective/videos/287979288894958>
5. Deepavali, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/137055149649585/videos/3456209684603509/>
6. Christmas, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/womenandmediacollective/videos/154060479456416>



## Using New Technologies for Social Media

The pandemic season gave us many levels of experience at the personal and professional levels. The unpaid care workload had tremendously increased at home and it affected women's time in the workplace too. WMC's time use survey done in six districts: Nuwara Eliya-tea plantation, Batticaloa-war affected area, Badulla-rural women, Kurunegala-rural women, Gampaha-garment factory workers and migrant workers and Colombo low-income families showed that many women were engaged in both the paid economic sectors and unpaid household work, with varying experiences.



The challenges faced by women in these sectors, especially in tea, garments and rural sectors, were extremely serious. Also, due to practical issues of mobility, online communication helped as an alternative tool to TV and radio programmes in the mainstream media to discuss the day-to-day unpaid care work issues. Zoom technology became extremely popular during this period for conferencing. We used this technique in the form of online discussions with some veteran activists in Sri Lanka on the topic of “Corona without pay and increased workload” from selected sectors such as tea, garments, rural, and people with disabilities. We recorded five discussions each in Sinhala and Tamil. Journalists from mainstream media were employed to moderate the programme.



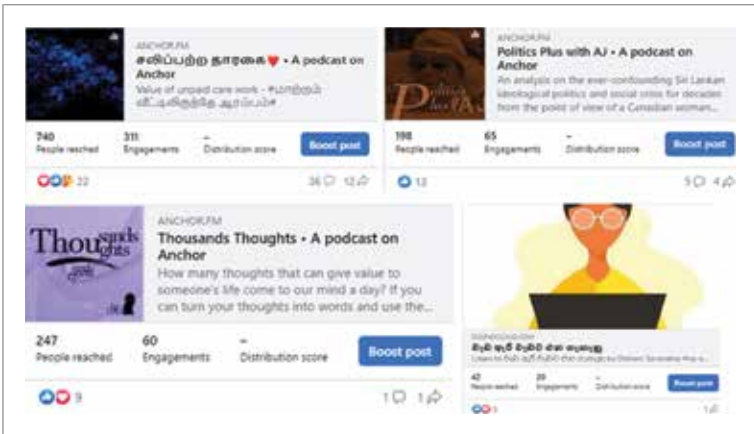
These Zoom discussions were shared with networks working on women’s rights and economic rights, so that those who were unable to watch the videos during that time could listen to the audio of these Zoom discussions via WhatsApp as an alternative.

The social media posts were shared in various ways by some Facebook Activists including Progressive Women’s Collective, Men Engage Alliance, Hashtag Generation and political figures such as Sri Lankan Parliamentarian Harini Amarasuriya<sup>4</sup>. These shares enabled social media discourse regarding unpaid care work.

<sup>4</sup> From the Face Book page of Dr. Harini Amarasuriya MP, 10th September 2020, At her maiden speech at The Parliament of Sri Lanka. <https://web.facebook.com/HariniNPP/videos/646275746021550>

**Podcasts are** another new medium of social media. Although Podcasts was not used as a very popular medium in Sri Lanka, it was a medium that created attitudes and social changes through social discourses in many countries at the international level. A training was given to a selected number of participants on what a podcast is, its importance, important issues and how to create a podcast using technology. At the end of this session, the participating group wrote poems and stories about unpaid care work. A series of creative podcasts with feminist perspectives was published in social media. The Sinhala and Tamil podcasts were shared on the participants’ personal Facebook pages and through WhatsApp groups. The participants received very positive responses from working organization and friends for creating such a media product.

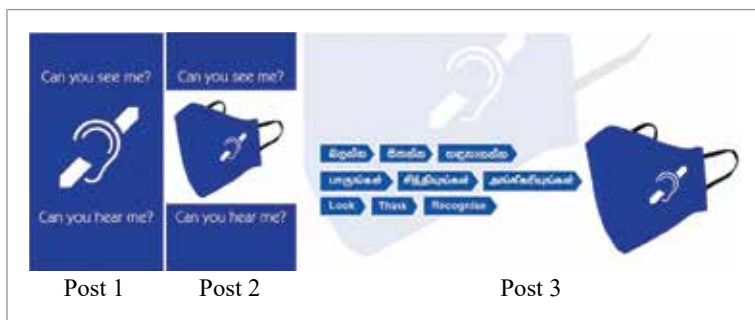
We also tried to motivate the creation of videos about unpaid care work through TikTok art, another popular aspect of social media. For this purpose, a public invitation for a TikTok competition was made through Eshan Dias, a queer drag queen performer who has more than 1,200,000 followers on the YouTube channel, and an awareness video about the competition was made. However, we were surprised that we didn’t get any TikTok creations for the competition about unpaid care work at the time and it was difficult for us to understand why.s



## Hearing and seeing the persons at SLDRO

Another issue that emerged from the Zoom discussions was the difficulties faced by people with hearing and speech impairments in accessing services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we discussed this challenge with the Sri Lanka Deaf Rehabilitation Organization (SLDRO) with the advice of Ms. Chammi Dias, a sign language interpreter who was constantly involved in social media work.

In particular, due to the Covid 19 curfew, country lockdowns and travel restrictions, there were communication difficulties in going to the market and buying essential goods or ordering these online. Representatives of the Sri Lanka Deaf Rehabilitation Organisation (SLDRO) shared information on this and pointed out that their main ways of communication are sign language as well as lip-reading and about the difficulties they faced because others were wearing face masks. WMC responded by contracting out the production of 3000 hygienic mouth masks with the international symbol representing the community with speech and hearing impairment. These were then donated to the SLDRO for distribution to the district level members. WMC's main aim was to get the attention and facilitation from society and service providers to identify and communicate with those who needed services and to enable the speech and the hearing-impaired community to obtain their daily needs and get on with their daily lives. Hearing and speech impaired members as well as non-disabled members of their families were also donated face shields without symbols. WMC believed the masks will help them to overcome obstacles they face during this period. A related online FB post campaign, boosted with tagging, was also created to capture the attention of the public, the private sector, and the other institutions. The following images were the social media posts WMC posted one by one, day by day to get the viewers' attention on how much persons with hearing and speech impaired are unseen and unheard in this society.



**In Order to Communicate with Hearing and Speech impaired**

Look Think Recognise



The Covid 19 virus, has get again raised its head in Sri Lanka. During a time when people are desperately searching for essential goods and services, persons with the above symbols on their masks are part of the hearing and speech impaired community. Let us be sensitive to their needs and aid in their search for essential goods and services.

The Sri Lanka Deaf Rehabilitation Organisation (SLDRO) with the Women and Media Collective (WMC)



Post 4



Post 5 (Short awareness video including reflection)

The protesters at the Aragalaya<sup>6</sup> using hygienic mouth masks. There was a separate space for persons with disabilities at the Galle Face premises. This image is a screen shot of the video they posted on their Facebook.

<sup>6</sup> [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=7447880138616526&id=100001838411804](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=7447880138616526&id=100001838411804)

## The Support of Celebrities

WMC also adopted the strategy of including public figures in some social media campaigns to create wider social discourse. Eshan Dias who is a currently trending public figure on YouTube is also a comedy actor who discusses social cultural issues on social media as a performing artist dressed mostly as a drag queen<sup>7</sup>. Hence WMC decided to reach out to Eshan to address this issue of Unpaid Care Work and the importance of sharing the work with male family members. He created a 10-minute video “Rassawa” (riaidj - The Job), received 248K views, 8.2K likes and 527 comments of which 90% of comments showed that unpaid care work and its burden was recognized by the viewers. The comments, were mostly in Sinhala and were by men and boys. Other YouTubers who are Eshan’s subscribers reiterated the issue in their comments. Some fans of Eshan added their appreciation of subtitling In Tamil and English, which was never seen in Eshan’s videos before.

Eshan himself shared his views with us where he disclosed that this had been a different experience in his own work, deepening his own understanding of unpaid care work. The comments received for the video were 97% positive, including from women who confessed they had not thought through this issue: “A meaningful video, I would help my mother hereafter, I did not realize my mistakes until seeing this video, I cried a lot after understanding the meaning of mother and her work.” Eshan also revealed that unlike his previous videos on his YouTube channel, having subtitles in English and Tamil was a new experience for him. The video was published on 17th October, 2022 on his social media platforms and he voluntarily promoted the WMC TiKToK competition on Unpaid Care Work. Eshan shared his views with us: *“I was used to producing videos to make my fans laugh and enjoy but this video was a different experience and for the first time my fans commented, they cried after watching the video. It moved me a lot that I have done a different meaningful story than my earlier videos. It encouraged me to think differently.”*

As a feminist organization, WMC also gained experience by engaging in different public social media spaces. The success of this video was the effective messaging of women’s unpaid care burden through a men’s perspective. There were very few hate comments.

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<sup>7</sup> The video ‘Rassawa’, 2022. Esha Dias has reached more than 263,125 followers in his YouTube Chanel and his outreach is approximately more than 25K for each YouTube video and short videos. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ2XhOf8OAM>

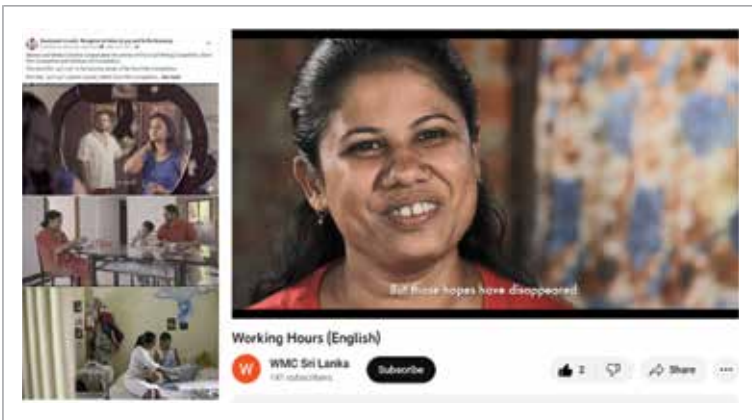


## Visual Awareness for Change Making

Films and movies have the extraordinary capacity to touch hearts and change minds. The Woman and Media Collective's used this powerful medium to bring awareness on unpaid care work in Sri Lanka. A short film competition on "Recognising, Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Care Work" was held in 2020. The call for submissions was done via the WMC Website, our social media pages such as Facebook, in all three national languages (Sinhala, Tamil and English).

This competition has been one of the highlights of the media activities of WMC and has seen submissions of innovative productions by women and men from across the country to showcase gender equality. It was a unique opportunity for those who were interested to come up with a thought-provoking 2-minute videos that addressed various aspects of unpaid care work.

In addition to the short films, a video documentary was developed by WMC at the conclusion of the project for policy advocacy. "Working Hours,"<sup>8</sup> a short video focused on the research, advocacy and awareness creation on unpaid care work carried out by the WMC. The film was produced in three languages with sign language versions for wider awareness. The video was screened at a national level conference and knowledge sharing workshops as it was significant that this was the first documentary in Sri Lanka made on the subject of unpaid care work.



<sup>8</sup> Working Hours, 2022, Women and Media Collective, <https://youtu.be/yMMggivqT6w>

Moreover, during the period of Aragalaya in 2021 WMC created three videos for International Labour Day which included the struggles working women encountered during the economic crisis. The videos emphasised that International Labour Day was not only about acknowledging workers who received monthly wages but it should also acknowledge the women's contribution on unpaid care work as labour.

Through trilingual billboards placed at main intersections in the capital city and several other districts, the key messaging around the necessary policy was continuously highlighted. WMC also ran the messaging on the digital billboards as part of our online social media campaign using voice as well as sign language.



## Unpaid Care Work and the Way Forward

From the beginning of the unpaid care work programme, WMC used social media to lay the basic foundation for educating society on the subject. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, podcasts, and websites were used due to the challenges of using mainstream media at the time in the country. By digitizing other activities and making the most of social media, WMC was able to gain many new experiences in the use of new media. In addition to innovative new media such as Canva, Podcasts, etc., the trilingual style and sign language were incorporated into the WMC media strategy as new means of communication. This



added positive value to the identity of WMC. We see it as positive that we were able to cover more social media output than expected despite going through tough times.

As a country that is still lagging behind in terms of social development, the burden of care work on women and the way it is seen as the duty of women, should be changed. For that, there is a need for constant media advocacy with feminist ideas. Being able to organize the outputs of activities such as non-commercial films and short films into regular awareness posts, increased the discourse on unpaid care work. To break the established role models of women, a change had to be made by portraying positive male roles. We have a long way to go. We know that social media alone is not enough.

One thing we have confirmed from the children's drawing competition is that children see such subjects in a very positive way. Since children are the next generation to use social media in communication, the education and media sectors should focus carefully on creating awareness on the subject matter of gender and care work. But there is still a need to actively work on the issue not only on social media. The reason is that although social and cultural awareness could be created through social media there needs to be a focus on setting in place practical programmes, and pushing for state and non-state financial allocations to support care work and reduce the burden on women. As a whole, social media can be used to expand the reach of our projects. And WMC has many more creative innovative ideas that can work on 'unpaid care work'.





In most households in South Asia, unpaid care work is carried out by or are considered to be the primary responsibility of women, for the well-being of family members. This publication brings together a selection of research papers presented at the Conference ‘Equality & Equity in Recognising Unpaid Care Work and Women’s Labour in South Asia’ convened by the Women and Media Collective (WMC) in collaboration with the Social Scientists’ Association (SSA) in October 2022 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The conference was conceptualised as a platform to broaden the discourse on unpaid care work in Sri Lanka. The papers in this volume explore unpaid care work in Sri Lankan households in the fields of overseas migration, public policy, time use surveys, women in cooperative societies, the plantation sector, sexual identities and social media discourses.



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